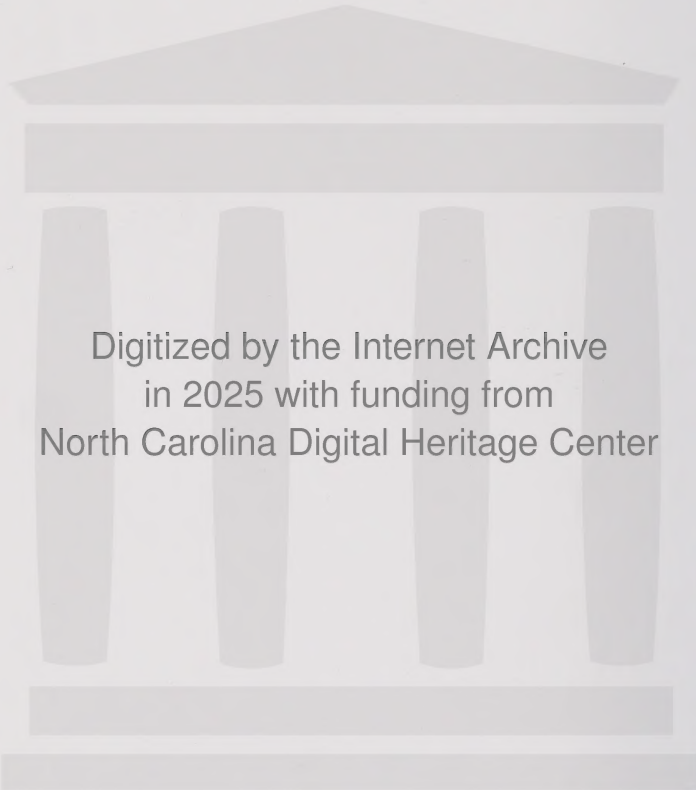


THE RHAPSODIST

2020





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The Rhapsodist

Spring 2020

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Asheville, NC

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rhapsodist, n.

Pronunciation: Brit. /'rapsəd ist/ , U.S. /'ræpsəd ist/

Etymology: < rhapsody n. + -ist suffix. Compare French rhapsodiste ...

1. A collector of miscellaneous literary pieces. Now hist. and rare.

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A-B Tech's Student Services Department



Editors' Note:

"Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read."

—Groucho Marx

Dear Reader,

As A-B Tech's primary venue for literature and fine art, *The Rhapsodist* showcases the best examples of creative expression from our college's diverse population. We are excited to share a journal filled with imagination and candor—work that inspires both outside and inside of a dog. Thank you for your continued support of *The Rhapsodist*. Enjoy...

Marx, Groucho. *The Essential Groucho Marx: Writings by, for, and about Groucho Marx*, edited by Stefan Kanfer, Vintage, 2000.

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The Restoration Depot

Elizabeth Helmich

Motivation

does not exist in a bottle,
in a session, in an hour, or a day.

A journey isn't traveled alone;
every encounter details
the footfalls of each breath.

Call bells chirp
as little birds flock
and fret together

in morning's tangled hair,
nurses scatter like nocturnal
bugs exposed to light.

When needs are met,
the congregation soothes
themselves with hymns

of respirators and feeding tubes,
dripping for survival.
The conductor reroutes

our train as passengers
travel alleyways of cars
that shift and lurch left

in the right light.
Therapy beckons.
Providers don smiles

and good intentions,
pausing upon entering
to scan for signs of welcome.

We're the friends
you haven't called for.
Angels earning wings,

wearing lenses
crafted with clarity
and without expectation,

lined in a stubborn
veneer of hope.
We meet you *here*.

Offering ears and hands
to gently guide you back
to the station you boarded.

If you never see us again,
we've heeded our call.
If, someday, you find yourself

with ticket in hand
for a different platform,
we'll meet you there, too.

And we'll learn the stops
on the next route, together.
One breath at a time.

The Persons Served

Daniel A. Garcia

1.

The house is made of large gray blocks of stone. In the summer, the stone weeps and water drips down the sides of the home. It was built in the nineteen-twenties by a wealthy landowner in Asheville. During prohibition, the wealthy landowner took his family to Canada with disgust at the newly passed law. The house stayed behind. A group of nuns in the nineteen-seventies were gifted the house by someone I don't know, and it became a group home for adults with intellectual disabilities. The street for which the house is named is St. Dunstan's. Almost one-hundred years after it was built, Terry Anders had his fifty-fourth birthday there.

2.

Stephen often smells like shit when I open the front door. The shit cakes onto his ass because he is not thorough with his wiping. He is capable for the task, but rarely does he make the effort and will refuse any aid. Stephen is bald on top with a great mass of grey wiry hair on the sides that turns into an unkempt beard. Stephen's father had a daughter. Stephen's father forced himself on this daughter, and Stephen was born. His sister couldn't take care of him any longer and left him at the emergency room of a local hospital not far from St. Dunstan's. Stephen has taken to sleeping on the sofa in the living room. There is an outline of human grease on the couch like chalk to signify a dead body.

3.

Lisa is upset.

Yes, we will have hot dogs for Labor Day.

Labor Day is one week from today.

Yes, that's seven days from now.

Lisa passes me her tablet.

DAN WOULD YOU PLEASE PLAY THE BEATLES FOR ME
PLEASE?

Lisa's only living relative that cares is her Aunt Daisy. She lives out in "Sparkinberg". We take her to spend the night at Aunt Daisy's on Christmas, New Years, Easter and Fourth of July. Daisy is a pleasant and wrinkly old mountain woman. She pumps Lisa full of candy and soda on their holidays. Daisy always gives me a bag of Moose Munch when I pick up Lisa to ride back to Dunstan's.

4.

Laura's mom comes to the house to pick her up every other weekend. Her mother is sprightly for being eighty-two years old. I think she stays alive sometimes for Laura. Two nights a week, Laura works rolling up silverware at the Olive Garden. Laura wears a C-Pap mask because of her sleep apnea. She always takes it off in the night. I worry that she will stop breathing and die. I worry that it will be my fault. Laura takes swimming courses and does line-dancing at the YWCA. All she really wants to do is lie in bed and watch *It's a Wonderful Life*.

5.

Andrea wears overalls because she likes to flash her tits at strangers. Andrea is bad in the best way.

She gets bored at the bowling alley and will yell the word
SHIT!!!!

She looks at me and smiles.

I smile back.

We have an understanding.

Andrea's mom is her only family left. Her father left when he found out she was intellectually disabled. Her mum is all she's got. Andrea lived with her mom until she was thirty-two (she's forty-seven now). When she came to St. Dunstan's she was non-verbal and refused to wear clothes. She would disrobe at every opportunity and laugh and run and cry about the house. She talks a good bit

now and always dresses in overalls. We do the dishes after dinner together every night I work.

6.

Melanie sees her mother every other weekend, too. Her mother is not as dependable as others, and this sends Melanie into a spiral of depression and anxiety. Melanie is in constant fear that someone is talking about her. She carries a Discman around the house with her headphones on. It's a front. She wants to hear everything that everyone is saying. From years of living in a house with employees talking shit about one another, Melanie knows it's bound to happen at some point. When the walls begin to close for Melanie, if staff is not vigilant, she will jam a handful of dry cat food into her mouth. It's how she copes.

7.

Mary is from a different house, but she spends her days at St. Dunstan's. Mary is a diabetic narcissist with a failing liver. She doesn't move so well, but makes well-crafted verbal threats.

ME GONNA PUNCH YOU MOUTH DAN!

ME STEAL YOU TRUCK AND ME CRASH IT AND ME
KILL YOU CATS DAN!!

Mary has a rabbit that lives in a cage outside of St. Dunstan's named Thumper. When she's feeling anxious, we get the rabbit and bring it inside the house. Mary sits on a torn bed sheet on the couch and holds her rabbit. She talks to Thumper and kisses him. Sometimes, to get a rise from me, Mary will put all of Thumper's ear in her mouth. She will also talk about how one day she is going to grill Thumper with salt and pepper and butter. She belly laughs and looks at Thumper.

8.

Terry grew up on a tobacco farm in Haywood county. His father and mother are both dead. His sister uses drugs and long ago retreated to the backwoods from where she came. Terry loved her old boyfriend Daryl. He used to bring Terry all sorts of snuff, cigars

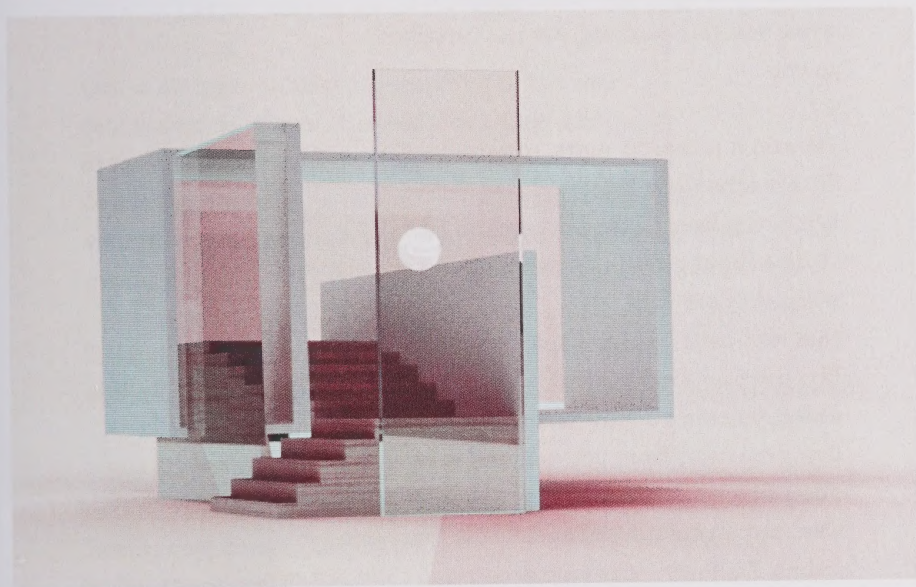
and chewing tobacco. Daryl came to pick up Terry once smelling like booze. He wasn't allowed to take Terry out and never came back after. One time, after finishing his portion of Grizzly Wintergreen after supper, Terry had a seizure walking back into the house. He crashed his head into the door frame, and a great puddle of blood formed under his head as he shook and snorted.

9.

We got an ice cream cake for Terry's birthday. We all sang to him with the lights out in the kitchen. We bought him a cat for his present. It cried under the couch. Terry liked the cat. He pet the cat, and it ran away bell jingling and with thumping feet. It was Terry's fifty-fourth year on earth. He is not alone. We are here. Some of us are paid to be. We blow out candles and wait to have cake at who's birthday is next.

Modernia: Send Your Ideas Here to Live

Joanna Guy



Sick

Ximena Guadalupe

There is nothing wrong with your rage.

They would have you think there is, and this is to
hatch the furies round your awesome head
to peck and scalp you like for a stir-fry,
while you gain nothing, are not broached
to you.

They do it more, far more, to women.
That means there is more threat there.
When you hear all those commonplace
stories about girls and women not being believed
when they say rape,
that non-belief is pure show,
because everybody knows,
unless you are a Janus-head,
living cut away from yourself and manically not
observing what is unpleasant to you, because you
were not ingenious and endowedly brave enough
to be a Ria Pratt—the lone desecrated child self-kept,
the one sole Witness to the desecration, kept,
via a code, a trigger (what the Janus mock to disallow—
no button in—as they can't),
but not repressed Ultimately, gone forever,
like the victims that get thrown in garbage bags
into the dump, are lost to funeral services.
There are many Janus among us, near-sighted (ethic
as what you can) and Oedipus on the other face, but

bereft (not guilty), like being stung and clobbered to meat,
a pulp that would have flowered epiphany if not for dead—
as the killer never could have got for himself and hates
those who can.

Or they fan away with the hand. While you
may say nothing to them, about their own things to say,
their own responses, take. Would not think to.

Let me tell you about two men in my life, now.

One is swagger, is black love, but not in the way
that is true, is earned. Instead that cheap way
of me on top as you were. Me
degrading, me become the one to take a mother's milk
ante to videoed porno, just in a barn, told by someone's re-
memory.

He said, those girls that get acid thrown on their face,
well, they did something to transgress the bounds of their community.

(They played good girl as taught,
said no to lech on street. For this
fear, agony, done consignment
to live the waste of self,
a chthonic angulation—(joints crack and hold,
cells hiss, like whale call, kettle siren, a slow letting)
(*taunting hijack grinds like a pyrenee
to reclamation
the one done to
the truth and Final word)
—to genius of another way.)

He said the source of all evil is white, and that whites come from apes, and blacks from God.

This is rage, the corruption of rage they blur you with,
when you are its O; a rage not innocent, as in, not aimed
with the instinct (that a dog may have, if a grown person
does not) of what is true; just spillage like seed, school
shooting.

I talked to him one time; he is slick talking, flirt, handsome
(in a way you were not maybe first to, given Chris Reeve
as Superman your first thunderclap of *my ideal*, and
strutting stylish Papi in photos (pointed collar), but came to,
a recognition not able to be altered, because this is America
in time of Denzel and glory; this is MJ's moment, and his dance
and innocence like no other (my star of beauty, for the music
and the movement, and the cut face deferent to hate,
as I was too, my nose not wide, but arched like, maybe,
my Mideast ancestor's in pre-Inquisitorial Spain (Penélope Cruz
on South Park repped as horse with long nose, eating from a hand.
this is edgy humor, not the knife. My talk is not edgy; it is lame);
and rap, that sweet voice that Angelou pointed in an interview,
that undeniable flaunt in the videos with the gun pops and girls
as slithering colts to lather and spit on, shine and mount), attractive
in the way that would be true without the split hoof in the boot
(resting on a gold jalopy). Man.

Not afraid to touch you teasingly, direct in his gaze,
quick and brash in his judgment.

You are more, hesitancy and silence.

Speak to fill silence, to say something to the cock holding court.

Is the bauble's the prize's the soul's plumage apparent to all but her.
Is that why they make her think they can't see it? Is it too
effortless, an aura? Is that why
the one who struts and scrapes his talons

and shoot-cranes his neck
picks you to show this to?
Because you give him space
You wonder
at the need; it looks like abundance. It may be. Misdirected
to the eating of you over self-racking.

One conversation, and then, Come see my workstation,
where I do trading. Two computers and some computer programs
you are not familiar with. And you go in because America teaches
that boys and girls, men and women, are the same.

Other places separate them, drastically. One group, of course
the brasher, more willing to maim (in general speak, due to
brutal cut from the breast (a violence dense and lost as a walk
through woods on an ancient day, spotting and dodging species
now gone, or by model), raised up—lessons:
do not talk intimately/levelly to our helpmeets, with very fine line
to booty exile concubinage if they step out of the bounds of the
community we have erected for them, if they are able and mad
to look back at you.

Not in America. Here men and women are not essentially
different; and we can be friends; we don't have to
sit one table men, the other women; women don't need to be
chaperoned; a woman can be the boss of me, and I don't take
that out on another she. So you go in
because the friendly man, about your age, says come,
take a look at my computers. And thirty seconds
in, a hand down the back of your pants.

And you know that this muscled swagger who says
uh-huh and yeah yeah and I see, is not a girl;
or you would not have wanted him; he holds

promise of something new, he is different from you;
an opening onto, an invitation to unknown, a different kind
of mastery, the opposite enfolding you—won over. You are
alright (as Don Draper said to Roger on his trip); you enticed
a piracy into new worlds, Go on the ship adventure (are the
storybooks right, or were there bad meals, tight knots, and
planks?)—

but there is a code in place... in this country
we don't sit apart.

Sure, I will see your computers. And next minute,
a dance of resistance and compromise,
like the pigeon fluttering and gone still in the hawk's beak.

Is this won over? (does he want to pull you to him?
Like a lover or a bear?)

Not the satiation I look for.

I should go

Just a little more, pulling her by the waist of her jeans (these jeans
are a sin in some places and times; where any upturned wind-billowed
heavy somber tulip over you or bonnet with buckle and blinders still
does not keep you safe from gazing)

Let me put it just a little in

Humping away he does not notice the position of your pinioned hand,
your wrist aching

You want to stop?

I said so many times

I'll be generous, and I'll show my control, but next time: think,
it hurts a guy when you cut him short like that, not a very nice
thing to do

Don't want control.
They call you names,
educated and presenting helpful,
or common and openly rageful
 (bipolar, hysterical, crazy bitch),
 when you are a different way.
When they have no control.

Welcome your rage.
They want you blank
as the milk they suckle
from the breast of the dark
woman pinned down in the
barn. The flow is for her
baby, for her becoming.
They siphon it off, and they cut
tongues (old stories; Philomela
is your saint, and your church
is relevant), when your way of no
is even dainty, says yet please.

Know: please or none: there is no way to win.

Know: the names they call you are a ruse,
 because THERE WAS NO BETTER WAY.
You did not need to pose a good house—good
girl; Class; contained; like vaginal lips sewn together,
making it smooth as a dove's back- and then puncture
an in, like for coconut milk, for life!—and the unbroken/

not dirty girl, Clean whether by Not self-given in desire
or has Not made the mistake, of being Taken
by a whooping pack (with many realms of guarding
like that parade-time rape where the ones fingering her
are encircled by many rings of brethren, shielding
their self-same, which is not the lamb the lass the
cunt with tears in the middle.

The one who morally avoided a violence
is Not an unwrapped, a Showing, an out,
sticky candy with flies; same goes
for your Emotionality;
for what you can see, what they can see
of you, what you make them see of themselves.

They would have left you no way.

THIS ALL IS NOT YOURS.

There is no way to say it. It is already known,
even if it's lost to them, because they are not prodigies
of innocence-guarding, like entered, toyed with
Ria. Saint and gladiator of memory.

The other guy reads a poem of mine

and says, Write about other things, things not you.

Things you? you should ask. Don't you have your fill of that.

The rage is your life, it is your uncontainable, your
Infinity. Aim it deftly (ocean by way of hose...), because
they will imprison and cut you for saying no, for
looking back at them. Or they will waft away
the lines... (like the black activist male professor did;
when, a true hero apprehends links, is not afraid of women,

of raising Any wretch, of losing) because they can. Know they can, and that they know they can. And that's all that that is.

I tell you keep your rage, because I have tried
the wisewoman over the Medusa, and I find
her removed, not pulsing. Able to give direction,
but as a monument, with a plaque;
already resigned, to what is,
already not of this world.

The raw skin, the untaken, is jump at burn; even at electric shock.

It is a dilemma,
I cannot tell you what to do.
Because they have many different ways
to kill you, when you keep your rage.
And the Life is one thing, is the all,
but is it almost all, because
even the brave,
especially the brave,
are too human; and when it is time,
it is X (living like: died long ago)
haggard from no sleep, Rushdie having to
seek another way to his baseline/heartbeat,
it is little and all as stilled life—wanting to write
(a return home; to heartbeat. We speak of a kind,
not fostered) but afraid
because a woman's ebullience, not allowed
so much see and say, gets her criminalized,
and emptied of meaning, in the Business
University, gets her future taken from her, not different
from her father prior to immigration/flight to America,
jailed for five years for no to Martial Castro

(Don't let them tell you there is a difference
between here and there. It is only a matter of opportunity,
not vision promises blazoned mottoes),
it is lonely, it is lashes every thirty days, it is Antigone
in the tomb and there is no preparation for it

There is no way out.

And you may just
get too tired, and be glad
at least you Did.

But losing the rage that takes you out
of bounds is the end of you, and the only
win there is
is you.

Frozen

Ashlen Smith



Adoration

Morgen Lance

Your beauty
 chokes the dirt
and spills a stain
 in every face

Your being bleats
 as these rotting wires
chew at your flesh
 And dry the wine
in your veins

Your blisters
 Are blossoms
And your ichor
 how it bundles on skin

I kneel and watch you ignite
 a silver wreath
while I hand you
 a wrought briar

What Occurred and When

Jeff Horner

"Besides," he said, his tongue flicking against the space his bottom bicuspid once filled. "Beside, *besides*"—really trying out the word, enjoying it—"besides this, *beside* the cellar door—you know what I mean?"

I wanted to say yes. I breathed deeply to say yes. I tortured my lips to mouth the word.

He leaned in first—his breath, a sticky gas. "The *meek*, right? We *shall*?" *Meek* came low like a shibboleth through a door slat.

It would occur to me later how profound he might've been if I could've taken him from a certain angle. Up close made occurring difficult. That snot bubble. How it shrank then grew, sometimes to extraordinary size, until it popped—inevitably—the dying and drying on top of a thousand prior snot bubble deaths, only for another to boldly step into the breach.

His gray-green beard was a war scene. Or the Arlington Cemetery, but for snot bubbles. A horrific, facetious thought—but analogous, maybe. I knew we'd feed many vets that day. I'd been told as much. Before. By *her*.

I put the tinfoil-wrapped potato I was still holding back on the plastic cart I had dragged over as an introduction—a wobbly piece of nonsense we pulled out of rented vans. He stood off by himself, and that appealed to me. I twisted my face to ask what he'd seen.

He moved even closer. "You heard that before? Did your fancy schools teach you nothing? *Besides*, before your cellar door—*us meek*?"

Maybe I was wrong—*us* didn't seem to include *me*. "Oh

yes, um," I said. "The Sermon, yes? Sermon on—"

"Us meek will inherit *all* this shit you left, leave, leaves of grass, to cover all, let it *work*"—expansive hands, yellowed, the flick of the tongue—"and *you* shits"—on you, he jabbed a finger deep into my chest, leaving a mark like an overstruck bullseye—"you shits are the leavers. The leavers-behind." Proud nod.

It *did* occur to me how close we were physically, standing on this steam grate—one in a grid of them—at the edge of Adams Morgan on a winter Saturday morning. A population around us moved swiftly toward errands or Temple or brunch. Puffs of breath and puffs of steam, like cloud cover for the unacknowledged steam grate world. Us *persecuted*, thirsting for righteousness next to a massive fountain of a cherub forever spitting in our direction.

Like the man in shiny leisurewear locking his brownstone behind us, turning on Italian heels, un-acknowledging us as he passed. A blank slate to the steam grates. Eternal tabula rasa for the poverty just outside his climate-controlled door.

I could feel *her*, Patricia, the volunteer organization leader—Local Activism for Relocated Citizens—although she would say, her head bowed, her tight smile screwed in straight, that "we have no leaders here, only fellow good souls"—could feel her smell conflict, could feel the wind of her shift our direction, arming that smile for a frontal assault.

"Cuz you ain't fooling me. No fooling the fool, man. I know. We're the trash to you. I mean, you're garbage, too, but not like real garbage, like us"—expansive hands include the group of relocated citizens we were feeding—"Like, garbage, man. Trash man. Hash, man—like gimme some, amiright?" He coughed a rough laugh into his hand. His lungs were a rusty furnace.

And Patricia—consummately thin Patricia in feature and personality—The Patricia, I thought of her as—was now only one relocated citizen away from us, and while her eyes, her thin, high nose were still turned towards the woman of an indeterminate age

who kept asking if the government still had her son, that smile turned toward us. Like radar pinging against the hull of a Russian sub. Like the tapping of my little metal boat against the porcelain of my childhood bathtub, and watching the waves wash over the side, and knowing as they pooled in pleasing tracks along the linoleum that I was *gonna' get it*.

I wish I could say that it occurred to me, even in some deep recess of the lizard brain, the very obvious line of progression between all these thoughts that led directly to my fellow—*my fellow*—in front of me, even to my need to be something to him, to excuse the pain in my poked chest, and especially to keep The Patricia away from us.

But all I could focus on was our proximity.

He could've been thirty or seventy, but nothing in between. It occurs to me now that it might not matter.

He kicked at the cart. "Hot potato, hot potato."

"Three potato!" I said.

He clucked his tongue appreciatively, and said, "So I can tell you a secret, yeah?"

The *yeah* went up like the next stair landing. For me to step up to. Because yes. *Yes you can*, I thought. I forced my hands deep into the pockets of my faded hoodie, else they might flap away.

Because I hoard secrets. Store them away, from tiny to grand, alphabetized by sin. I bring them out when I'm cold or lonely.

Let me tell you a secret, my mother said, drunk—me, a precocious five. *Let me tell you what your father's done now*.

I like to look at them from every angle. To see what occurs that's new.

My first boyfriend in college told me he *just couldn't make it hard, like ever, like no matter what, and maybe I'm—but no matter what, yes, but please, you can dump me—just don't, just*

don't—

And I never would. They were *mine*. I treasured them. Especially from strangers—no weight to a stranger's secret. I could let them float to the ceiling, keep them on a string. I roamed the streets for them. The woman on the bus who *only beat my kids to make 'em strong*. The old man, drunk at the deli midday who *can't get them dead Vietnamese out my head*. How he'd snap his fingers in time with his words.

I would tell The Patricia that it must be my "kind face" to explain why this happened to me so much—if she asked over some post-activism coffee—but the truth is, I invited it. Something in the way I stood, open-toed. In the way my eyes flew wide, like so many joyous hands floating to the ceiling.

And oh, this man—my grate man—the secrets he contains. It occurred to me then, yes, the secrets he must contain. I wanted *all of them*.

I saw it in him from a distance, it occurs to me now. I wobbled that cart over because *I saw*. I sought out *her* through that telephone pole flyer with her face on it—downcast eyes—because I wanted *to see. To feel*.

I'm drawing him in, I thought. My open face. The mark of a good soul. Not *you*, Patricia. *Us*.

"The secret is"—tongue flick—"you're doing *us* the favor, Bambi. *Your* dead mother, cellar door—throw us in the bin—sure! *We* recycle. Reuse—fuck, we *are* reused—seven generations! The shade of trees you'll never cool by. *Us*—reused, rescinded, rewinded, reworded—sure!—but just so set to re-furl, *un-furled*, yes—yes!"

"Everything hunky dory, Jesse?" The Patricia still remained trapped by the indeterminate woman, still a safe distance away, but I had to think quickly.

My expansive hand wave. "Oh yes, yes, thank you. We're just—getting to know each other." I tried to think of a Patricia

phrase, but *hunky dory* tripped on my tongue. I let my mouth move, let syllables fall out, hoping they'd land in the shape of appeasement: "And it's a' pizza pie!"

Not the shape I expected, but I had to commit, so I kissed my fingers to signify just how *delish* the pizza was.

My odd statement hung between us three; I screwed on my tightest smile. She returned fire with one even tighter—a brief truce.

The man eyed The Patricia with suspicion; I nodded in conspiracy. He whispered, "What you grass-leavers don't get is The Great Boot Camp you made. Survivor Island—*wrong*, DC's a swamp, but you the mosquito. Buzz buzz, Mister Aldrin—well, you can buzz off in your ride-share spaceships. Take your shrimp cocktail with you!"

He spun once slowly—"Jumbo shrimp!"—expansive hands flailing—free to express—joy and pain and more than I ever could—the space between them growing until all was held within—neutron stars, nebulae, feral cats—all could live and propagate and die and fertilize the next cycle there—but he'd keep going as is. Keep slow spinning just like this. Until it all stopped. Absolute zero in those yellowed palms.

"*We* got it down already. The whole *shabang*. Practice makes. You don't practice. Flute lessons—ha!"

The Patricia—"Jesse?"

One hand waved her away. "The power goes out, and you're pooping in your panty drawer. Stinky drawers! No A/C for your tomato plants? Boo. Hoo! Tears on your pillow! Wait, where'd the pillow go? Who's gonna fluff your Nutter Butter now? Who's gonna take the kids to fancy pants class? Pants-less Wednesdays, but now every day for all the days. Burn the pants now, I say. You been burnin' the world already. *We* get the burns, see!" He pulled down his turtleneck, thrust aside his bird's nest of a beard, and there sat a vicious scar disappearing down his neck, a gnarly purple, a *secret*.

"But that's where you're wrong. We comin' out the other side. *Mother Fucking Theresa*." He clapped on every syllable. "Re-born, re-wind, we-don't-need-no-fan-cy-pants. Because we *survive*. Us!"

A puff of steam. I flipped up my hoodie. I like how it muffles sight and sound. Directs it. I wanted to be *his* horse alone, blinded to the rest.

And what he said next, it occurs to me, he said so solemnly, but not like Patricia solemn, but *real*/solemn born out of neck burns—"The secret is you selling the best personal trainers in show biz. *They don't call it show friends*. You been helping us inherit all this *terra firma egg frittata* all along. Just by playing it like *you*"—tit poke—"The Cock-a-roach! The Skeeter!"

Those flappy mitts landed on my shoulders. I could see their imprints later, grimy-green on navy blue. Hands so big, they could erase me. And what they contained between them.

Solemn again: "You could, though. Be with *us*. A part. *Apart*. Save yourself. 10 percent off. Going fast. *Hunky dory*. Faith and glory."

And the world around me slowed.

It occurred to me that The Patricia was a step away now, her mouth moving, but I didn't hear. For the best. What could she have said? She didn't know. *Us*.

It occurs to me now how deeply green his eyes were. Tropical seaweed. Uncharted forest. Off the map and off the grid and off the hook, yes, how I could get lost in them. Come out the other side cleansed. *Mother Fucking Theresa*. The Nutter Butter Sandwich of the Mind. What is burned is burned behind me. Toy metal boats. All The Patricias. Brownstones and Italian leather. True crime podcasts. Neutron stars and rent deposits. Pink Floyd posters. Potatoes in tin foil. Personal relationships. E-vites.

Because. Because I am The Phoenix, yes—The Phoenix of the Yellowed Hand. Because I am chosen. I am *Us*. It occurs to me.

But not then. Any occurring then was erased by his breath

this close, and its acid-strength flaring at my skin, my eyes, my poker face, and as much as I tried, as much as I kept repeating, chanting to myself *this is a person this is a person this is a person*, instinct won over all, and I swiped a grubby arm away, gagging.

"Please," I asked. "Please."

A half step back, his green eyes as wide as a coastline. I can see a nice jawline now beneath that beard, but then, I felt only relief. Breathable space.

He cocked his head. He squinted. He screwed his face up tight, then released it into a smile, but not a Patricia smile, but a full one—expansive, containing the whole dang world—like dissonance building only to release, clean, back into the melody.

"Quack," he said. And then, in response, "quack, quack"—but not a joke quack or some low-rent Donald Duck impression, but feral, guttural—a truly wild thing. "Quack, quack, *quack*," he said, and he began to dance—but not like a duck might with a waddle and a flap, but with a neck dip and a lunge—like, like—it occurs to me now—like a giraffe ducking canopy, or really, like a giraffe with severe dysphagia after too much pasta—delish!—"Quack! Quack!"

It occurs to me as I turn the memory to a different angle that The Patricia might've been soothed by a duck dance. A pattern she could embrace. Another duckling to beak into line.

But this incongruity would not do, and she clearly felt it was *my* fault, a dagger of a look over that screwed-in smile, and I could hear her good soul slip out of those pursed lips with a high train-whistle that forced her mouth open just enough to reveal a row of so many compressed diamonds.

"Yes," she began.

"Yes," she finished.

No amount of hunky dory-ness was going to pacify The Quack Quack Man. He lunged and dipped with abandon, dancing his way off the steam grate.

The Relocated—called by the quack—quickly circled

around him.

“Yes, yes,” said the indeterminate woman, not unkindly, and with a dull reverence, a flat “quack, quack” in return. They corralled him away, still in circle formation, him dipping and quacking comfortably as their center. Their reason. For whatever. A common purpose. *They plus him equals us.*

He would be fine, as long as they would. And vice versa, V for victory, *veni vidi vici*, yes. It all makes sense now. After.

But then we stood and watched, dumbfounded, as the bedraggled group moved away, herding their captain—maybe to other steam grates. Maybe to the Duke Ellington Bridge. I liked to go there sometimes, too.

Our wobbly trays were still heavy with hot potatoes. Patricia said, “Let’s persevere, shall we?” but she didn’t mean it. The Popping of the Good Soul.

I don’t recall a single event the rest of the long, gray day—not a quack in my mind.

And I never returned to the grate. Or to the group. He didn’t need me. *They* didn’t, at least not the way The Patricia’s of the world thought they did. I know it seems cold, a foolish take from A Foolish Child of The World, but that’s easy for you to judge, sitting there, reading this in your fancy pants.

I did, however, begin walking more—because I believe in epilogues. I wear my coat less on cold days, more on hot ones. I bought itchy wool sweaters and learned to enjoy their abrasiveness against my bare skin. I pushed for that extra five minutes on the treadmill—my lungs, an overworked furnace—but just as pain melts into orgasm, I knew what I sought could only be found in The Step Too Far. The Boundary Erased. The Email Deleted. No more A/C or heat or Netflix or true crime podcasts or forgotten platforms that automatically drained my account monthly. Nothing that even whiffed of fancy pants or the plastic fancy pants comes wrapped in when you dry-clean it.

It occurs to me now that this change happened when I met him. Only now it occurs, but I guess that's how occurrences happen. After.

What did occur to me then was the littler prayer I caught myself whispering as The Relocated whisked him away, my Quack Quack Man. Low and humble, I still repeat it often, especially in *the moment*. Especially as I train for the next world, the one we're all inheriting, the one we're all burning ourselves toward.

It's perfectly shaped and suited for all *the moments*. It's the Grace of the Always Present. The Mantra of the Phoenix of the Yellowed Hand—expansive, but small enough to hold.

It occurs to me often.

And I could tell you—sure. The prayer. I really could. Memorized—engraved on my good soul through a tit-poke.

But no. I don't think it works that way. It's only for *us*. The meek, right? Learn it on your own dime. You can't get there from here. It's *our* secret.

Portrait of Dashiell

Joe Pellegrino



Bloodlines

Kyah Phelan

my mama's mama bleeds starlight from her scalp
lullabies sewn into her smile lines
and goodnight kisses on her fingertips
her arms open like the doors of a church
all refuge and color and devotion
all water to wine and sour to sweet
all music and tears and saccharine salvation

my daddy's mama holds a warm fire in her belly
it licks at her teeth and sparks fly from her laughter
her love smells like tomato leaves and fresh coffee
is the color of turquoise and tastes like moonlight
her love feels like firm hands in soft soil
scoops into your chest and sows seeds along the edges of you

my mama might as well have wings
with that light already glowing inside her
and her soul airborne amongst the clouds
her palms have novels inscribed along each line
each one holy
immortal and forever being written
that woman holds the whole sky in her lungs
spoon-feeds me the wind
and pours me glasses of sunbeams

my daddy's childhood tasted like cherry ice
like bloodless brotherhood laced between crooked teeth
carried that syrupy sweet love through the years

until i was born with a tongue stained crimson
grew gaps between my teeth big enough to fit friendships and
laughter between
learned to untuck and unfold my heart to match the size of his

my blood is as thick as fresh honey
golden and glowing and sweet on the tongue

and even if you haven't sat at my table since birth
i will pull up a chair for you
offer you a glass of cherry syrup and sunlight
tuck turquoise in your starlight hair
and ask you to stay awhile

Forget-Me-Not

Siobhan Turner Mountain

My grandmother is preparing to die. She has been cleaning out her closets. I read somewhere that the discarding of personal belongings is normal at this stage in life, and family support is imperative. She calls me on the phone and asks for my address. "I have some things for you," she says, "and for the new baby. Remind me, when is your due date again?"

I find an envelope wedged in my front door a few months after the diagnosis with a familiar return address scrawled on one corner. I imagine my grandmother in line at the post office: boots on, tops touching the hem of her gray quilted coat. "I am sending these to my granddaughter," she might have said. "Have you got any packing tape?" She would have addressed the clerk by her real name. The postmaster would have come over to say hello.

Inside the envelope, an audible book of farm animals, and a vintage children's dictionary—mine, long kept at her house—with a photograph tucked between the pages, marked *Sha: age 11 at school*. There in the center of the photo is a stand mixer on a shelf behind the two other girls of Kelmorsha's Shake Shop and me. A memory of my grandmother springs forth, and I laugh. There she is, delivering gallons of ice cream to be kept in the cafeteria freezer until after lunch when the entire fifth-grade wing transformed into an assemblage of fake businesses run by groups of three or four, each in competition with one another for phony revenue. Later, my two friends and me giggling over milkshakes as we total the amount of pretend money we made.

We took first place.

Another few months, another envelope arrives, this one larger than the last; my grandmother's familiar handwriting is on

the outside, a little wobblier than I remember, making the physical distance between myself and the comfort of a bedroom I'd slept in as a kid suddenly immeasurable, cruel, and permanent.

Inside the envelope, a snapshot of my father looking over his shoulder and into the camera: Christmas Eve. A wavy silhouette behind him reaches for vodka in the refrigerator—my grandmother. The two of them and my memory of our whole family together again brings me back to singing carols around the piano in my grandmother's living room. I smile, recalling the excitement for holiday food and the chance to play with all of my cousins. James and Michael, visiting with their parents from the coast. Katherine and Gretchen, the two older sisters that I never had but always wanted. My aunts and uncles, cracking jokes, playing cards, and getting drunk.

I place the photograph in a wooden box marked Memories, there on the mantel next to my brother's urn. I wonder, did we all know that Christmas would be the last one we would spend together?

After the fifth hospital stay, I find the third envelope. Inside are sheets of yellowed paper stapled together. I pull out a script titled *The Second Grade Presents Din-o-mania*, and an old card to my grandmother from Sue. I trace my finger across the words on the first page of the script. The lines for Paleontologist 3 are highlighted, indicating that it was my part. I can still feel my nerves wracked with anxiety over speaking in public, and how my cheeks flushed under the warm stage lights, growing redder by the second after I stumbled over my first line. My grandmother had come to watch us perform. After my entire class sang our final song, she found me backstage and said that the musical was the best she had ever seen.

I believed her.

Later, a ride home from school, the wind whipping my hair around while my grandmother smoked a cigarette, her tanned arm dangling outside of her open window. She told me that she was

proud of me.

"Know what else," she said, exhaling a plume of smoke. "I can't remember who, but someone asked about you the other day. And do you know what? I said that bitch is feisty. She's going to be just fine all her life."

She was right.

Most Thibodeau women are, you know.

I smile, turning the card over in my hands, remembering her bathroom. The card is there, carefully taped to the mirror, and I am eight-years-old, studying it while playing with my grandmother's collection of makeup and nail polish. There on the front, a man pushes against a door marked Pull at the entrance to the Special School for the Gifted and Talented. Puzzled, I asked my grandmother what it meant. She explained that it is a card that someone can only appreciate after the wisdom that follows innocence has settled in the dust of puberty—a memory of mine forgot, now welcomed like an old friend whose last name I can't quite put my finger on.

I imagine her giggling when she put the envelope in the mail, perhaps while remembering our shared appreciation for the smaller details that make life worthwhile. Things like, handwritten letters; long car trips around town in December to see the streets aglow in red, green, blue, and gold; photographs of gentler times; the comfort of fullness.

Two weeks before the funeral, a final envelope arrives. Inside, I find a photograph of my grandmother beneath a large tree—the red maple she'd planted to commemorate my birth—and a grainy Polaroid picture of her beloved piano that she'd promised to pass down to me. Amidst the photos, I find a single packet of flower seeds: Forget-Me-Nots.

I stare at the seeds, silent in the bittersweetness of it all. My mind wanders back to piano lessons and sneaking snap peas from the vegetable garden my grandmother loved so much. Outside

my window, as I rock my newborn in my arms, the wind picks up, and I listen—thinking of her laughter, soft and sweet, floating on the breeze.

I imagine the pot where I will plant the seeds; I decide on a shade of blue, like that of the crescent-moon eyes that frame her smile in all of my memories.

Ecuadorian Sky

Nicole O. Lavoie



Of Senseless Tragedy and the Chlorinated Universe in a Virginian Waterpark

V. M. Kornfeld

I filled my mouth with hazelnuts, intent to portion them throughout one long drift around the lazy river. Yet ten-year-old wishes are often short-sighted, and I was lucky to make it an eighth of the way before finishing them. And what is the folly in that? There were always more hazelnuts in the resealable plastic bag, tainted only slightly by our pool water hands, and several collective loose teeth. There were always more hazelnuts and enough time to run—no, to walk just speedily enough that the whistle didn't get you, even when you chose to run behind the lifeguards' backs, all the way up the ladder to the best waterslide.

Mama has the best CDs. Mixes her friends burned, Danny's first album, the Black Eyed Peas before they were played at roller rinks and in animated action movies. She slides a mix into the player and life leans back. Chlorine hair and fingers wrinkled from the pool water. The inside of the car is too humid and warm, but better than the rain that drove us away from the water park just ten minutes before, and the heat is sort of like a stuffy hug, annoying, but not on purpose.

I am end-of-day-child-exhaustion as I topple to bed that night, and mama sings a song anyway, probably Sarah Harmer, or "Blackbird" by the Beatles. A bed is shared upstairs; it's not our house, not really, just visiting, but when we're here *everyone* in the house lives here. So we live there all weekend I suppose. Motley

family. Crammed into not enough square feet. She visits here to visit a bit of her life that happened before I happened, but she shares it with me, because above all, she will give me whatever she can manage. Be it hazelnuts or memory or "Blackbird."

Breakfast here means the sugary marshmallow cereal I was never allowed to have, and as much as I want of it. It's not the colorful kind; it's the version from the co-op store just a mile away, because this morning is a treat, but why add unnecessary food colorings to it? Legs are still too short to reach the ground fully beneath a mismatched chair, so my toes swivel all by their lonesome on the unfinished, never-to-be-finished floorboards. The boy who was my brother for a moment eats three big bowls of cereal. He never slowed down enough to let getting tall catch up, much more concerned with cereal than he was with being lean.

Brother for a moment was the first person to show me how to steal snacks from a vending machine when nobody's looking. He uses a strong arm and a curved stick to knock Twizzlers off the second rack, and I am forever more fascinated by taking without consequence.

Mama refuses to refer to him in the past tense.

The last boy I knew was the one at the waterpark, who ran too fast and got whistled at by pool guards.

And he was big, but still small, in the sense that even big little boys are small.

And in my head he's still just a big little boy, with a penchant for free Twizzlers and sugar cereal.

And in my mama's head he's probably still covered in flowers in the densely packed earth.

And his own mama is still crying like she forgot how to not cry.

And the time in between never did happen for me.

And he is still the big little waterpark boy, but all boxed up now and covered in flowers. And his own mama doesn't have

to worry about him any more, and yet she'll have to worry in a different way until the day she is covered in flowers as well.

I am nothing, if not the child who filled a small mouth with hazelnuts one day at the waterpark, and sugar cereal the next. And I am nothing if not my mother's son, and I refuse to refer to him in the past tense. What is a past tense worth, if we're both still kids at a waterpark, which we always will be, one running and one walking as fast as I could. One stealing and one watching in awe. One eating three bowls of cereal and one eating two. I am no more real now than he was back then.

And the day is still exhausting.

And the car ride home is still so warm.

And we are brothers for a moment.

And forever.

No Home on the Hill

Ellie Ritch

The detritus of the *herd*—
Upturned Earth and hoofprints
Dried to obscurity in the sun.
And the *bones*
Like *old* plastic
Are shifting below the paper *blanket*
Laid down by the trees.
Sinking further into the Earth with the passing seasons.
You and me, we walk
Kicking up the leaves
And disturbing their sleep.
Wind blows from afar;
It takes leaps and bounds over the rolling pasture.
And the air only sighs at you
And *whispers* to me
Of years to come
In these hills, where we could stay together
Rooted to the land where I was cultivated
But where you were transplanted.
While the wind takes its long steps
Over the Blue Ridge.
The hills beneath sleep,
And they all wait,
Sinking further into entombment.
Leaving the bareness
For us to plant ourselves here.
An empty place waits
For me and you

The Funeral Home

Grier Low

I've been to so many funerals this year that I've started carrying around fentanyl strips in my pockets. My backpack is stuffed with fliers for suicide prevention hotlines, Narcan dispensers, stoppered one ounce bottles with elixirs of plants meant to ward off anxiety attacks.

Charli never asked me for any of those things, and so here we are, now. And she's all wrong, starched white shirt buttoned on the right side anchored in place by a crimson tie. Funeral wares for transwomen too optimistic for advanced directives. Charli had this thing, ok, about how any floor could be her bed; she didn't even have a mattress in her own room. Just a strip mine of blankets and sheets—striped, checkered, plain, and stained, you name it—colonizing the middle of an otherwise perfectly respectable room, its dubious contents scattered about like precious ore for the taking. Now she's got a permanent single occupancy bed in velveteen the same color as her tie, like there's a Cravat and Casket Funeral Set for Wayward Boys.

Charli's mom is crumpled as a heap of used Kleenex in the front row, if a tissue could have puffy red eyes and an aura of alcohol. Her hands tremble and flick at a lighter, her most recent husband at her side, watching the two bathroom doors with sharp, falcon-like eyes. The funeral attendant flutters nervously around the bereaveds' shoulders, chirping, "Ma'am? Please, no smoking. Ma'am?" Charli's mom brushes him away, lipsticked cigarette in hand.

The eulogizer—I'm not sure, an uncle of Charli's, a childhood teacher? It's unclear—orates with a froggish wobble, but I can't make out a word he's saying other than he's generously

peppered in “he’s” and “him’s.” I focus on the swaying of his jowls, wonder what he will eat at the family’s home after the reception, whether he will get drunk. I can’t think of liquid. You just can’t, in these situations. It’s almost enough to make you want to switch places with the deceased. Just crawl in that casket and never have to fret over navigating multistalled, gendered bathrooms ever again. You’d think that with this influx of trans deaths, funeral homes would realize there is a market for trans-comprehensive facilities. They could make a killing, if they could figure out how to jump on the LGBTQ-concern marketing bandwagon. Guess you’d have to start with the family first.

I shift from foot to foot. Addison catches my eye, and raises an eyebrow. She looks pointedly towards the bathrooms. I shake my head just slightly and tilt my head towards the goshawk perched in the front row, talons resting on Charli’s mom’s thigh. Don’t need those aimed in my direction today, no thank you. She grimaces at me. We’re both feeling it, the forty we split before the service, out by Charli’s favorite place to watch the trains go by. We’d tried to laugh, trading stories about days we’d spent skating with Charli, mostly skating after Charli, fearing for our lives. Like the time she took off without a word, rumbling her way to the intersection of Broadway and Jones Street, where a giant pickup sat, proudly flying the Stars & Bars so that their bigotry could flutter easily in the breeze. She must have pulled out her knife at some point, because as she rolled by, she grabbed that dumb fucking flag in one hand and sheathed it off with her blade, and was gone. Lord, that girl. But, honestly, it was mostly hard to laugh. We focused on the gurgle in our stomachs, 10% bad malt liquor and 90% funeral home apprehension. This service wasn’t our first rodeo. We had done it almost a dozen times, the confused uncles and fretting aunts, having to sit through the wrong names used for our friends until we could memorialize them later ourselves, somehow.

Charli. There is so much to say about her that I don’t want

to share with Addison. How we hooked up a cool handful of times, early into our friendship, nights that always seemed to conclude in a spilt bottle of wine and stale English muffins upon waking. Charli had bopped right along after a while, looking for someone who didn't have to get quasi-lit to fuck. But I kind of hung around her periphery, always watching Charli. I'd watch how she flipped her hair and the quiet way she laughed, and would love her for each and every moment she had spent studiously working to perfect the moves that so subtly emphasized her femininity. Our friendship grew in a steady way I was unaccustomed to, like a sedum in a warm kitchen window sill. One minute, you're hoping the propagation will take hold; then—without notice—your little plant is afire with blossoms, and you realize it's been uninterrupted months of blissful growth. My favorite memories of Charli are the nights we'd spend in her basement bedroom, where I would scratch out mix tape playlists in the desk lamp light that silhouetted her slowly burning cigarette of a body, hunched over a drawing. This was before the oxys and the H, before Charli looked to the harder shit in hopes it would make her molecules feel like they would slow down and figure out how to work in tandem.

A cool hand slips into my sweaty one, and I realized my eyes are clamped shut and my teeth are gritted. "Fuck it, let's go. As much as Charli would love it, we can't piss ourselves at Charli's memorial service." Addison is determined. "The women's room is around the corner, and further out of sight. Less likely anyone would notice." Heads bow in prayer and we are off, a special kind of bladder-influenced walk-run found only in times like these. Addison is pulling her skirt up before she even pushes into a stall, I whip out my peestyle and let it rip. It's moments like this I can almost get down with god. I close my eyes and tilt back my head, urine rushing out of me like my body was designed to do this one thing. The cold white tile echoes the sounds of our mutual pissing, like we're in a urine ASMR chamber. I sigh into the echo. "Don't wanna

go back out there, either,” Addison says. I hear her wipe, flush, and slide back the stall lock. “But we gotta, man. It’s almost over.” I agree to poke my head out the door first, being the one equipped with the actual parts this bathroom was intended for, though maybe you couldn’t tell it from the two-day-trans-boy stubble on my face.

The heaving, sweating, reddened-face bulk of him is so close we almost brush chins.

“Can’t you FUCKING FAGGOTS have any respect for anything?” Charli’s stepdad is screaming at me, her mother and the funeral home director in line behind him. The funeral director looks as if he may faint dead away. Charli’s mom squints behind me, to Addison peeking out from ladies. But he, this angry, angry man, is solely focused on me. “This is a funeral service for my son. My SON, you hear? With HIS mother, and HIS family, HIS aunts and HIS little cousins who aren’t *sick and deranged like you fucking faggots* who think you wanna wear dresses, and THEY have the right to use the bathroom without knowing that they’re going to walk in on a perverted MAN getting his rocks off in the women’s room!” I realize then, that he is talking about me. Addison is passing in his eyes, and it’s me who he thinks is a transwoman. We bust out laughing.

“No, I’m, uh, I...” I can’t think of a way to explain that, actually, I was called a girl most of my life, up until weekly injections of testosterone lowered my voice a couple octaves and helped me sprout facial hair. Fuck it. This is sort of validating, right? To get clocked as a man and verbally fag-bashed? Especially if it keeps Addison safe. Trans man in shining fucking armor, that’s me.

Our laughter seems to diffuse the situation, if only temporarily. The silence settles thick over the room, the way batter falls into a pan for a birthday cake. I think about Charli, alive and young, years before anyone could have thought a bad batch of heroin would bring her down. I imagine her life before this man, a bad

blond bowl cut and a new box of Legos. What sort of cake would Charli's young mom have made? Would it have tasted like cigarettes? Did Charli look at that Batman Lego birthday present and feel something in her stomach drop, or was this years before the feelings of gender dysphoria would surface? I could almost smell the burning of the cake before Charli's mom threw it out and went to get a premade one from the supermarket. Charli strapped in the back seat, cake balanced on her lap. More Batman. She didn't even like superheroes. The way it tipped out of her lap as she struggled to get out of the car, catastrophic amounts of white and grey and green icing against the aging pavement, her mom screaming and snatching her up by the crook of her arm and banishing her to her bedroom. She is screaming now, actually, in front of the women's restroom, mascara and snot really wrecking her funeral home drag.

"Get out!" Charli's mom sobs at us. "Get out, just get the fuck out!"

And, the sunshine. Patches of grass to pee where ever we want. Blacktop to conquer, forties to drink, normies to taunt, and friends to save. No more funerals, this year, please. Our little hearts and tiny bladders just can't take it. We're outta there, rolling from the funeral home parking lot into a world of great mystery. But not before we key Charli's stepdad's car.

2 AM

Laura Grace Dame

The landline. Ringing at the wrong time like it always does. Ringing during the program instead of during the commercial. Ringing during dinner instead of after. Ringing in the middle of the night instead of first thing in the morning. Ringing right now—2am. I've listened to its cyclical weeping once already. I let it "cry it out," like it's a child that I have to sleep train. But the electronic tears won't wear the phone out in the way a child exhausts themselves with crying; The phone will keep crying as long as it needs to, as long as it is asked to.

Like an alarm system panel by my bed, the lights on the phone dock and the handheld glow and flash; the phone wails into the room, throwing a tantrum for my attention. I'm staring at it, my fidgeting fingers begging it to stop. I wish I could squint my ears and not be able to hear the plaintive trills. Unexpected 2 AM phone calls seem to ring in a pitying, melancholy way like the landline knows it's zipping bad news to your ear. To your life.

I have to pick up, face the agony. Three simple steps, I tell myself. Like I'm in the infomercial for this *super special deluxe* brand of telephone: 1) press the translucent button! 2) say hello! 3) listen to foggy tones of devastation and grief.

After I hang up, I don't bother to tuck the phone back in. I don't bother sliding it back into its cradle, because now I'm the one crying in bed like a child desperate for comfort. And I *know* no one's going to pick me up. No one's going to cradle me against their face. No one's going to listen to why I'm ringing in the night.

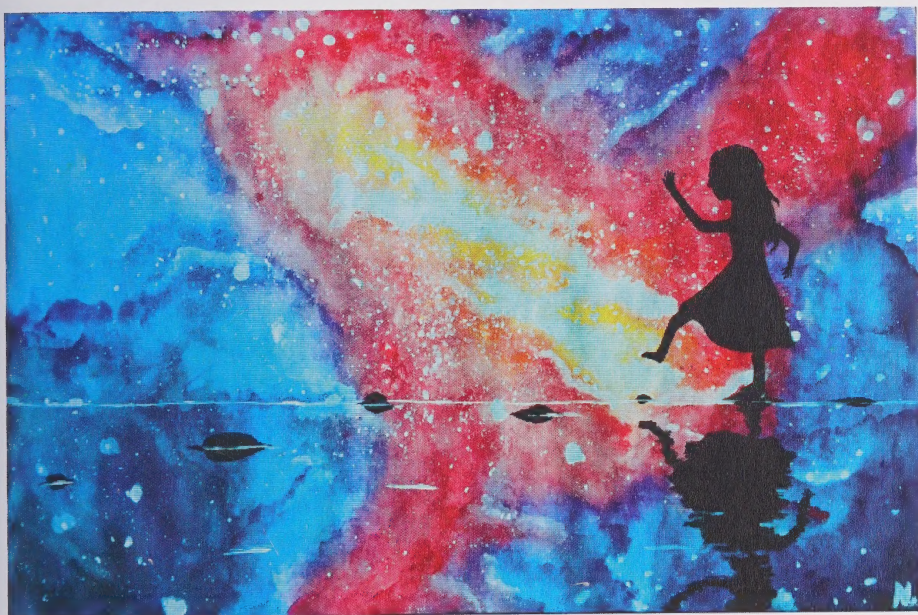
Sitting on a Shelf

Christian Donaldson

With her bows
And her golden sparkle shoes
A bumblebee backpack
Colored with
Pretty pinks and blues
A sculpted hand reaching out
Never to return
Sitting on a shelf
Sleeping in an urn

She Walks Among Stars

Nicole O. Lavoie



Golden Hour

Kyla Cottrell

For as long as Jane could remember, the house on the hill across the street from her own home had sat empty: two stories tall with flaky brown paint barely concealing the rotting wood beneath and loosening black shingles that blew off each time it rained. Even the plants around the house were dull and dying, weeds taking over the patches of yellowing grass. The house watched over the neighborhood as the world changed around it while neglect slowly claimed it. It had become something of a local legend in Jane's little neighborhood. Children would ride by on their bikes, whispering rumors to each other of ghosts seen within and strange lights floating through the windows on the second story at odd hours of the day. Pedestrians made a point of crossing the street so that they wouldn't pass by it on the sidewalk in order to avoid its gaze.

The superstitions of adults and children mattered little to the teenagers who lived in this otherwise mundane town, for whom everything strange and unusual was an opportunity for adventure. For almost ten years they shared the knowledge that there was a gap in the backyard's wooden fencing, just wide enough for an individual to pass through, and a window at the back porch with a broken lock that could be opened if enough force was applied against its rusty track. It was seen as a right of passage to skip class after lunch, walk across town from the high school, sneak in through the only entrance and exit, and spend the rest of the day within the house on the hill.

Jane was sixteen when her childhood friend, Miranda, and Miranda's boyfriend at the time, Joseph, had coaxed her into joining them on their trip to the house. Joseph was a senior. Seniors were trusted to pass down the information to the juniors,

who in turn swore a silent oath to continue on the made-up tradition and keep the adventure going just a little longer. Jane hadn't wanted to go with them and was still hesitant as she trailed just behind her companions, fidgeting with her hands and occasionally glancing over her shoulder towards the direction of her school. She could hear the heavy sound of her heartbeat in her ears as her breathing grew shaky.

"Calm down, no one is going to miss us," Miranda insisted as she slowed to press a guiding hand to the small of Jane's back, keeping it firmly there as she pushed her to walk faster.

"I still don't think that this is a good idea," Jane said, playing with the zipper on her red hoodie and pretending that she wasn't hyperaware of her friend's touch. She glanced over at Joseph, watching for any reaction he might have.

He led the charge a few feet in front of them, shoulders relaxed, and his hands tucked casually in the pockets of his army green varsity jacket, clearly thinking little of the physicality between the girls. "I've done this a dozen times," he said as though to reassure, but coming across more like a boast. "The teachers don't get paid enough to care if their students go missing from time to time; we just need to be back before lock-up for our stuff."

Jane breathed deeply as she fought to leave her worries behind. Her parents worked long shifts, her father a pediatric nurse and her mother a chef in the city. Neither would be home until late, but she couldn't help but tense at every car that passed by, imagining one of them driving home early just in time to catch her in the act.

Miranda looped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. Though she was several inches taller than her friend and the angle was awkward, Jane allowed herself to feel comforted by the closeness. It eased her anxiety long enough for her to follow Joseph as he led them through a narrow strip of woods behind the house. They all kept quiet, only the sound of their footsteps

crunching dry leaves and twigs audible in the air around them.

"This way," he said, both out loud and with his hands, as he brushed aside spider webs and overgrown foliage. He crouched down by the fence, the loose slat marked by a splotch of fading red spray paint. Jane watched as he jiggled it back and forth, the rusted nail that it hung from squeaking in protest. With a final tug it swung to the side and stayed still against the slat to its right, providing them with a gap that they could crawl through. He looked up at them with a proud smile, gesturing to it with his head. "Ladies first."

Jane glared at him while Miranda let her go, eagerly getting on her hands and knees and venturing forth. Joseph offered Jane his hand. She ignored the gesture as she crouched down and squeezed through the fencing on her own. As she crossed the boundary, the air around her chilled, her arms turning to gooseflesh as she shivered involuntarily. She zipped her hoodie up and folded her arms across her chest, looking about the backyard and noting how it was cloaked in the looming shadow cast by the house, its facade far bigger than a house with sinking foundations should have. Several feet ahead with her hands clasped together in front of her, Miranda bounced on her toes so that her long blonde ponytail swished from side to side, a bright smile on her face.

"This is so exciting," Miranda squealed softly, careful to not let her voice get too loud. Despite the house having been abandoned for roughly twenty years, they were still technically on the property illegally. Joseph walked past Jane, and Miranda sidled up to him, keeping close while Jane hugged her arms to her body and trailed just behind them.

The backyard was just as barren as the front, scraggly weeds taking over pockets of the dusty ground and dying grass struggling to take root. In the middle was a collapsed slide and swing set, the metal frame rusted and crumbling while the plastic was faded and worn away at the edges. Jane blinked as a shadow

passed in front of her vision, the anomaly gone before she had time to consider what it might have been.

A sudden screech and smack startled her focus back on her companions, the two already on the back porch. The sound had been the window, forced open inelegantly by Joseph.

"Get up here," Miranda snapped playfully, beckoning her over with a grin. Jane let out a sigh and made her way up the unsettlingly soft stairs to the springy deck, the wood having all but rotted away and feeling as though it might give out at any moment. Her shoulders grew tense again.

Joseph aided Miranda first with getting in through the window before Jane was forced to accept his help. She was instructed on how to enter feet first and immediately realized why when she felt and heard a crunch beneath her feet. Broken glass.

The window had brought them into a dim dining room, a long wooden table sitting in the center with a collection of beer bottles and cans littering its surface. In the corner sat a pile of trash, mostly spent cigarettes that resisted decomposition. It filled the air with the smell of chemicals that Jane nearly gagged on before it faded into the background. The distraction was replaced easily by the surroundings that she found herself in.

The windows were hazy with dust and cigarette smoke, refusing to let in any outside light with which she might see. Jane reached in her jeans pocket for her phone and turned on its flashlight to better illuminate the space. She found herself faced with yellow pin-striped wallpaper that was peeled and curling in on itself like claws stretching out, and she felt as though they might grab her and pull her into cancerous black rot that was taking hold of the drywall. The floorboards creaked beneath her feet with every step, crying out a mournful wail for the peaceful life the house was never allowed to live. Cobweb veils hung from the corners, and as Jane turned the corner into the living room, she cringed at the sagging furniture and faded photographs on the walls that sat

trapped within their glass and metal cages.

"Isn't this place the neatest?" Jane heard Miranda say from behind. She jumped at the sound, so enraptured that she hadn't noticed her come over. Miranda put a hand on her shoulder to steady her, saying, "Whoa, chill out. It's just me."

Jane breathed deeply, though regretted it as the smell became oppressive again. "I've known you since we were toddlers, I'd never have pegged *this* as your idea of a good time."

"It's fun!" Miranda insisted with a smile, striding into the living room to drape herself across a red chaise lounge with holes in the cushion so that stale foam stuck out. "You need to work on your sense of adventure."

"And you need to work on your sense of self preservation," Jane retorted, looking around at the wallpaper claws and feeling tiny within the open space that the high, sloping ceiling provided. Moth eaten curtains on the front windows blocked the view of her neighborhood, and over the long cold fireplace a painting's colors bled together on its canvas into a murky brown so that she couldn't tell what the scene might have been. She kept her arms close to her body protectively. "Just a few breaths in this place could kill a man."

"Hasn't killed me yet," Joseph said as he joined Miranda in the living room, taking a seat on a wobbly footrest with only three feet and leaning his elbows on his knees to stay steady. "Miri, have you got a light?"

Miranda nodded her head and pulled a plastic lighter from her pocket, tossing it over to Joseph. Jane's expression curled in disgust as she watched him take out a cigarette and light it, taking a long drag on the end before blowing the smoke up towards the inert ceiling fan. Jane turned on her heel and huffed, mumbling swears under her breath as she started down a hallway.

Where the living room had felt too large for the space it was in, the hallways were almost unbearably tight. Though there was plenty of space to walk through, Jane found herself holding

herself stiff to avoid brushing her shoulders against the blackening walls. She found herself walking towards a doorway for what felt like minutes, yet it stayed out of reach. When she turned back to look at the dining room, she was only a few feet away from the arch she'd passed through to get there.

Jane shivered and exhaled as she felt a chill rush over her again, briefly warming as a shadow passed in front of her light. She tried to follow it with her eyes, but it vanished as soon as she blinked. Her ears caught an airy, laughter-like whisper. She glanced around her, shining her light with one hand and holding the other to her chest. "Miranda?" she asked cautiously, looking around. "Are you screwing with me?"

Her friend didn't respond, though Jane could hear Miranda and Joseph in the other room, recognizing Miranda's giggles immediately. She couldn't decide if knowing it hadn't been her was comforting or not.

Jane's shoulders tensed again as she heard gentle thumps, like footsteps, coming from above and growing softer as they traveled further down the endless hall. She turned quickly back to the living room, there in mere seconds. Her voice caught in her throat as she saw Miranda sitting in Joseph's lap, her lips locked on his, arms around his neck and his hands up under her shirt. Jane swallowed away the brief moment of jealousy and cleared her throat.

"I think someone is upstairs."

The two broke apart to turn towards Jane, both with heavy sighs and newly disheveled appearances. "Jane, we're the only ones here," Miranda insisted, shifting onto the seat and wiping at the pink gloss now smudged around her mouth.

"The window was closed when we got here," Joseph pointed out, running a hand through his mop of hair as he leaned back in the sunken grey couch. "That means we're the first ones in here since the last folks left. Window always gets closed by the last

person out."

"I don't like this. I don't think that we're alone," Jane insisted, looking at them desperately and shining her light between them.

"Then it was probably a rat, or something else," Miranda sighed. She looked up at her with a mixture of pity and exasperation. "Your brain's probably just playing tricks on you."

Jane grit her teeth and balled her free hand into a fist, her other gripping her phone tighter before she turned on her heel once again, this time in the direction of a staircase that led upwards. Behind her, she could hear Miranda and Joseph whispering between each other, Joseph wondering aloud if bringing Jane had been a good idea after all. In front of her, she heard those footsteps again.

She held her breath as she reached the top of the stairs, her steps slow and methodical as the floor felt as though it might give way under her feet if she wasn't careful. Jane steadied herself and shined her light down the hall, less oppressive than the one downstairs but still too tight for comfort. The carpet was soggy, a small swamp in the center beneath a dripping dark stain in the ceiling. The bare drywall was no longer white, replaced by a sheen of yellow-brown dust and grime. Jane could only make out the slightest silhouettes within the faded photographs, shadows of their former selves that time was trying to erase. She reached up and wiped away the dust clinging to the glass with the edge of her sleeve, letting herself smile at the sight of two figures locked in a loving embrace.

No one in town could remember who lived in this house. If they did, they never mentioned it to anyone else. No one seemed to care, as though the people who lived here were deliberately forgotten and the house intentionally abandoned. But the house wanted to remember.

Jane froze stiff at the sound of heavy footsteps, the sound

muffled from behind a closed door at the end of the hallway and that laugh echoing in her ears. She steeled herself, pulling her posture back and holding her phone light out as a shield against whatever might be hidden within. The chill ran over her again as she stepped through the mushy hallway, the walls closing in on her as she opened the door.

The cold almost instantly vanished and was replaced with the warmth of spring, sunlight shining in through the wooden blinds hanging over the window on the far wall. Music played gently from a record player in the corner; a love ballad that Jane recognized from the '80s music radio station that her mother played on their trips to the city. A dusty couch sat against one wall, bookshelves filled with piles of paper scraps against its opposite with a desk between them. And in the center was a glowing vision of two women dancing together.

Jane felt her voice get caught in her throat for the second time that day, rendering her unable to call out to her companions downstairs or let out a scream at the spectral forms before her. She found herself utterly enraptured by the sight. The room itself had a golden aura, as though everything inside radiated sunlight. And the spectral women in the middle were the brightest of all, radiant and completely unaware of the worn-down state of their surroundings. They altered the space around them, their projection of the past onto the present making the worn and molded room feel solid again. Jane knew that if she were to sit down on the couch it might fall apart beneath her, but it looked inviting in their light. The record player in the back was inert and lifeless, yet the music played. A ghost of its own spun beneath the needle to play music through speakers that couldn't have been turned on in over two decades.

The women laughed lightly as they lazily danced together, wrapped in each other's arms and swaying gently back and forth. One woman was white with short blonde hair and freckles made

even more pronounced by the aura she projected. The other woman was black with soft features and long black locs detailed with ornate wooden beads. Both wore unassuming silver bands on their left ring fingers, but Jane could tell that they were married at least in spirit. The two smiled as though the world was theirs and theirs alone, completely oblivious to Jane's presence. Their lack of attention to her put Jane at ease as she watched the intimate moment take place before her. She laughed lightly at the women as they sang along, terribly, to the music that they were dancing to. Their voices were distorted, filtered through the same aura that their forms were.

For a moment the white woman seemed to meet Jane's gaze, their eyes locking as the woman frowned. Jane froze in place and swallowed.

"Hey, Sophie?" the black woman asked, noticing her partner's focus had been pulled away.

Sophie blinked a couple times as though to clear her vision and looked away from Jane, meeting her partner's eyes and relaxing back into a smile. "Dinah?"

"You've got that look again," Dinah said, draping her arms loosely around Sophie's neck.

Sophie put her hands on her partner's waist and shook her head, brushing off the encounter. "Thought I saw something, that's all."

"Mhm," Dinah said, pursing her lips and watching Sophie closely. Jane took a step forward into the room, sticking close to the wall and still keeping her eye on them as the record began to play a new song. "You know I don't believe in ghosts."

"I'm not saying it's a ghost, just that there's something... off lately," Sophie said, looking down at their feet.

"Everything is fine, baby girl," Dinah assured her, her distorted voice barely reaching Jane's ears as she cupped the side of Sophie's face in her hand, guiding her gaze back up.

"Of course, it is," Sophie smiled, her shoulders visibly relaxing as she stepped closer and rested her head on the shoulder of her partner. Dinah held her close and hummed a contented note, kissing the top of Sophie's head.

Jane lost track of time as she watched them dance and share this quiet moment, breaking it only to serenade each other with lyrics that they deemed worthy. She relished the warmth that the two gave off, able to shut off her phone light and ignore the reality of her surroundings to be at peace.

It wasn't meant to last, however. The moment that Jane heard Miranda shout for her the scene faded away, the light and warmth vanishing in a flash that left her cold in the dark. She scrambled to turn her phone light back on, hurrying through the squishy hallway and down the springy stairs.

"There you are," Miranda said casually as she started to head for the back. "We need to get back to campus before security locks us out. My laptop is still in my backpack."

Jane opened her mouth as though to speak before thinking better and snapping it shut. Joseph noticed.

"What?" he asked.

Miranda stopped when she noticed they weren't following, folding her arms over her chest. "Come on, let's go," she insisted.

Jane pursed her lips at the expectant looks her companions were giving her, one inquisitive and the other irritated, before shaking her head. She'd keep what she'd seen to herself. They'd either think she was lying or crazy, anyways. "Yeah, sure. Let's get out of here."

Angel Wing Begonia

Linda K. Welsh



An Eye for Seeing

Jacob Garrison

An eye for seeing life in the decidedly lifeless

An eye for creating a pathway less wasteful

Refusing, Rejecting, Redefining disposability

Unwanted, turned away, rejected materials becoming sought-after
points of progress

Renewing (the) life—in—to—of—the socially-discarded cull

The maker a guide, translating the inner masterpieces for all

Seeing life *everywhere*, sharing life with *everyone*

Palettes and Pallets of life-giving, life-renewing skills and outwardly-
despairing remnants

Relentlessly yearning for the unexpected to blossom with
beauty

An eye for creating life into and out of the decidedly lifeless

Taking Darshan with the Lion and the Slaves

Whitman Bolles

I am drawn to those places overlooked, missed, forgotten—where no people go because there isn't any reason to. That's reason enough for me. In wastelands often a presence blows, ghostly resonation with the past, and therein shadows of the future.

One of my favorite hikes is short, close to the road, and not adventurous. But the canyon feels remote, there's water for the dog, and I can be alone to sit and listen. Bug Spring is only five miles up the Catalina Highway outside Tucson. It was the water source for the prison camp below (the site now of a campground named for Gordon Hirabayashi) where Japanese-Americans who resisted relocation, conscientious objectors of all stripes, Hopi Indians and Jehovah's Witnesses were held together during World War II and forced to work. In fact, they built the highway that runs 25 miles from saguaros to the alpine zone, 6000 feet up some pretty rough geology. All that is left of the prison, historically referred to by the euphemism "honor camp," are some stone and concrete foundations of their fifteen buildings, pieces of rusted metal in the arroyo, and sections of broken pipe winding upstream a mile from a defunct and roofless water tank to the spring itself.

The upper canyon is only about two miles from road to ridge, narrowing as it goes, and the unmaintained path is tricky to follow. After passing a couple of intermittent waterfalls, spots where the channel bends, the trail peters out at the spring. Even during dry seasons (early summer and late fall) and throughout

dry years (most, of late) this shadowed seep keeps dripping. A few small pools color cattails green and at the base of one cliff-drop the sand has been eroded down below the water table so there's always at least a wallow for the dog. In monsoon months or when a snowfall is melting, the sight and sounds of a Rocky Mountain stream hijack this desert wash, and wildflowers party along its banks. As do the animals. We see deer and sign of coyote, bobcat, raccoon and mountain lion. Once at the spring I noticed a motion sensing flash-camera strapped low to a tree; I'd love to see what the field biologist captured in those night shots. Probably lots of skunks, and my English pointer mix.

The hillside brush here is dense and the riparian trees few, as the entire area burnt about ten years ago. Some cottonwoods survived and others are growing anew, along with sycamore, box elder, walnut and Mexican blue oak. Boulders thicken into cliffs above the spring, making the route virtually impassable. I keep trying to bushwhack up and over the sag in the ridgeline, into a larger drainage where the actual Bug Spring trail meanders higher toward a different campground, but the canyon walls are too steep and full of sharp rock and cacti and bushes with thorn, and every contour ends at a ledge or overhang. The rock is granite here, as well as the upswelled layers of micaceous schist and banded gneiss that mark much of the Catalinas. The streambed route eventually requires rock climbing, which I can't risk since I've hurt my back. But just above the spring, off trail, there are nice spots under what's left of the sycamore canopy for putting a tent or simply resting. You can't hear the road unless a Harley or an ambulance rushes the yellow line. Charred snags and updrafts lure hawks, and grassy, bouldered, forty-five degree slopes provide them rabbits, skunks, lizards and snakes. There are no spectacular views; all the people are further up at overlooks gaping west, or drinking beer around the RV. This east side of the mountain range, not designated wilderness, offers more solace and wilder space, if rougher walking.

Often there's a pile of scat, looking just like cat turds from a litter box except they're two inches in diameter and full of deer hair, sitting along the trail just below the spring. Sometimes the pile is fresh, stinks, has urine on it as well. Once we found a half-buried kill. We've seen tracks, big ones in wet sandy soil, with no claw marks. Not a canine. On almost every trip my dog finds a deer leg, usually just the bottom joint and hoof, which she proudly devours. But I have to keep her away from any recent carcass, as the lion is likely to be near.

They are solitary animals, especially the males, requiring vast territory. At dusk and dawn they ambush prey, pouncing from above and smashing an ungulate (or biped) hard to the ground and strangling it. Their bionic hind legs and steel collarbones facilitate this strategy. Lions can leap thirty feet from a stand-still position, twenty feet up a tree. Though rarely seen, they are plentiful here, as evidenced by the field camera; hunting season in Arizona is year round, and of course the "hunters" use packs of dogs to chase and tree a cat and high-powered rifles to execute it. But this canyon, this whole side of the mountain, is too close to the road and the town and its tourists, and too close to the Pusch Ridge wilderness where not even dogs are allowed, much less guns. So, I suspect a correlation. It is just such a margin land that can offer best refuge. Considered neither pristine and protectable nor remote, this bunch of foothills and ravines lies forgotten between, overlooked, used up, discarded, and therefore undisturbed.

The men who laid the four-inch iron pipe and poured the concrete in order to direct scant oasis flow down to the work camp reservoir used burros, dynamite, pick-axe, pry-bar and wheel barrow. But that was nothing compared to constructing the highway. A mammoth undertaking—over ten years total—the prisoners initially cleared the trees and broke the rock, making way for heavier equipment. All so that rich folks could have cabins and condos to escape the Sonoran summer, and eventually a ski

area with shops that calls itself a town. This mountain range is too small, shouldn't have any road. But I guess it keeps the geeks away from vaster sky islands to the south.

At the camp, prisoners farmed ten acres and raised chickens and turkeys to provide their own food, which they also had to cook. Pictures today show baseball games and clean staff cottages beneath a flat-topped bluff. They had a vocational shop, a sewage system, four barracks, and a classroom. Conversations among inmates must have been few and frustrating at first, perhaps leading straight to violence. Imagine a reticent Hopi, raised among stories and survivors of much worse than this, bunking with a well-off, white Jehova's Witness, or a Japanese farmer from Seattle. Yet the place is known to have been free of fences, walls, or cells with bars. Armed guards, though, I'm sure. Dogs, probably. And where would an escapee go? At the time it would have been nearly twenty miles of difficult, hot hiking into town. I'm not sure if any men died of hard labor, disease, what-not. Now tourists and locals with some leisure time choose the same spot to pitch a tent or park a camper, because it is peaceful and pretty. No sign of past misery. After completion of the road in 1951, the camp became a youth "rehabilitation" center, housing mostly Native Americans. It went through various iterations of youth detention until 1973 when all buildings were razed.

During the war it was the same picaresque landscape as now, lovelier even—since the trees along the streambed hadn't burned—yet the people living there must have hated its nightly haven of stars, its blowing dust, its songbirds, coyotes, and crows. Its snowmelt, its yellow cottonwoods quaking in the cold, its rare cloudy days come thunderous summer.

I often have the feeling when there in the canyon that I am not alone, though clearly I am. Not a big believer in spirits (the dead must have better projects to pursue than me), I nevertheless sense the weight of the place. Pain and loss. That's what we share

across time, regardless of the circumstances—while nature keeps going as it always has, perfectly indifferent. The same basic principles play onward: predator and prey, dry years and wet ones. Cycles extending far beyond our minimal reach here, despite human cleverness. And it's good to be reminded of this truth; it puts my problems into perspective. I may be sad about not seeing my children enough, or guilty about not being there for them. I may be mad at the crazy ex-wife, worried about the tender new wife, grieving my expired parents, or plotting my way out of a bum job. But by detaching from the physical whirl of the city and sitting in the psychic presence of a hundred and fifty young men caught in police-state America, and by sitting in the material presence of a one hundred and fifty pound cat more than willing to pull all the meat off my bones and swallow it, I'm comforted, encouraged, and I leave the canyon in some small but significant measure giving thanks. I'd like to think I offer something too, via willingness.

In Hinduism and other eastern traditions simply being near a holy person or temple is a form of blessing from the deity. The word "darshan" comes from Sanskrit and means seeing with reverence and devotion—a way of receiving grace. It is used in reference to being with the divine, and it denotes an event in consciousness. Some days are better than others, of course, but this word describes much of my experience in the wilderness throughout my life, and especially—for some reason—in this canyon. Maybe it's all just timing, my state of mind these days coinciding with what I happened to learn about the area. Or perhaps wrinkles in the surface of our planet do hold memories, or better allow collective thought to burst through a gap in the space-time continuum. Or it could be that one morning I walked right beneath a hungry mountain lion crouched on a frozen ledge and was saved in an instant when my dog surprised it from behind—and a part of me knows and remembers this encounter. Or... Does it matter what draws me, or why, when the result is positive

connection with this life? My solitary walks are better than getting drunk and high, or watching television, buying useless crap at a big store, driving around town doing ambition, getting depressed. Some people go to church. Some seek others for meaningful company, or activities of distraction. Some don't bother to do anything spiritual. Many don't know it's an option.

I fantasize about the day we run out of oil and bullets, about building a refuge community in a verdant valley, about feeding the hungry, about hiding safely in the exclusion zone around Chernobyl, about wolves running through the ruins of Manhattan, about whales outing themselves as the dominant intelligence, about a life more in balance with the forces of earth after our species has had its come-uppance. But fantasies they all are. I don't know anything, much less what is best and meant to happen. But a person can sense when things are going wrong in the world and, likewise, follow one's instinct into the hills where others have been and where others still thrive, those who can instruct us if we listen.

L&M Menthol 100s

Daniel A. Garcia

Lisa McKnight
was in her late 50's,
did not care for men and
was weary of me.
Her family stole her disability checks
they would smoke and drink 'em up.
Her sisters would sell her body for cash
or drugs.
Lisa would holler that Gloria
was in the woods smokin' crack with
that boy!
She loved gospel music and
had a sweet voice.
In the early evenings she would
have
visions.
She would
yell and stomp
and throw her things.
She would walk HARD down the stairs
She would cry that her sisters were making her put rocks
up
in
her.
She would try to
call the police
and
staff would run to the medicine closet for Ativan.

She hated the woman who stayed overnight.
On the porch one evening
we were alone,
she took a drag from her cigarette and told me she got ahold of a
steak knife
and terrorized the woman who stayed
overnight.
She knew that woman was fucking with her money.
She smiled at me
and told me
slapping my hand
that she never seen a white woman
run so fast.

Riot Monkeys

Minna Honkakoski



The Man with the Black Case

Ben Latter

By the third ring, he knew she wasn't going to pick up. If she was going to, she would have by the second. Funny how the rings seemed to drift farther apart as they came, as if the phone were growing tired.

"Hey now, you've reached Janie, leave a message and I'll get back just as soon as I can. If you're calling for the S-W-C-A-B-S they're oh-oh-nine-*one*. Thanks!" *Thanks* was two syllables in her midwestern accent.

Her flurry of letters and numbers were like a dropped pan of marbles and always left his jaw tight. "Hey now," he said. It was unsettling, talking to a machine. Being recorded. Kept on some blinking black tower. Some part of him downloaded and frozen in time, accessed and then ultimately deleted. *Archived*, he supposed.

He continued. "It's me," like she didn't know, "I was just calling," and he trailed off, watching as two men rocked an old Caddy out of a snowy, rutted driveway as he passed, "I'm just getting started and let's see, it's about nine. Anyway, give me a call." He hung up and had to jerk the wheel as a beige car cut him off. He honked twice, and the other driver held up the back of a mitten.

Being cut off was hairy business on these roads. They turned the Volvo into as much a sled as a car. "Oh come on now," he said, trying to regain control, his nylon jacket whispering its panic in every movement of his arms.

The old car was headed that way anyway, so he let her slide into the turn lane and pulled into Gordo's PitStop. He filled the car up and took himself in for the same: coffee, a honeybun, and Gordo's nervous pleasantries.

When he got back in the car the little blue light was

blinking. "Damn," he said, tapping the voicemail icon. It wasn't her—the ID said unknown—but hers wasn't the only call he'd been expecting. He lifted the flap of his hat and put the phone to his ear.

"Yeah now, it's me," the familiar voice said. It was tired, reluctant, sharing something it knew it shouldn't. But old favors run deep in this business. "Okay. I'll do it. I'll wait for word it's done. Then I'll file. This is a big risk, and I hope," there was a pause, "that this makes us square."

It did. He deleted the message, knowing it wasn't really deleted, wishing the caller had waited until they could have spoken in person. Then he pulled onto the road and ran a yellow. It was an hour's drive to the next place, and he hadn't been late yet.

The highways were plowed at least, and the grey skies showed no promise of emptying—despite what that Carly Winston said on WCIX. The next house was out in Wiota, up a long stretch of farmland. Flat for elsewhere, but he took the time to appreciate the gentle rises and falls of the hilly valley—all freshly whitened with the early threat of a dreadful winter.

Houses up here are cheap. Big, but cheap, and the topsnow around them melts for all their leaked heat. They work unsuccessfully to curb the malignancy of their footprint with benign colors: warmed blues, smoker's whites, tasteless coffees. This one—an unimpressive yellow the way the phonebook was an unimpressive yellow—was no different. He walked up the plastic steps and frowned at the doorbell. He hated doorbells. This was a business for knocking. Doorbells were for your everyday salesperson of gadgets, knives, and insurance, both life and death. And yet it seemed rude to knock in the presence of one. He switched the heavy black case to his other hand and pushed the plastic pearl button—*Ding*—then he released it—*Dong*. Steps came slowly to the door and a shadow darkened the peephole.

He smiled kindly at the fisheye. "Central Guidance," he said.

The peephole stayed dark.

"I have a ten o'clock with mizz," he held the Z while he double-checked his notepad.

The door opened. The woman looked young, twenty something, thin and ashen. She clutched a red blanket that made her skin look blue, the pustules on her forehead all the redder.

"Finnegan. Are you Mizz Finnegan?"

"There's no Finnegan here," she said, practiced.

He smiled again. "Ma'am, there's time to defer your appointment if you want. But I'll need to file the paperwork."

"Nobody here," she coughed, and coughed, until the world seemed to shake around her, "by that name."

"Well," he said, voice flat and eyes still, "I must have the wrong house."

They held the stare. Sometimes this worked. Not this time.

"Well, okay then. Here," he said and held out a readied card, "If she happens by, give her this and tell her there's time to reschedule. It's best," and he paused there, both of them holding opposite ends of the little rectangle, "to do this by appointment."

She took the card and studied it. Forgetting her lies, she was still staring at it as she shut the door.

On the way down the steps, he turned back and admired her windchime—twine rope dangling sawn bottles. In a gust, they bade him good riddance.

He looked at his phone. No missed calls. No messages.

By noon the clouds had scattered and let out the sun, making for a fine drive to Argyle, where he hoped—but doubted—the next client would be more cooperative. But when he arrived, there was no car in the driveway and the garage had been left open, showing its vacancy.

He knocked, then again. He noticed a doorbell hidden by an overgrown vine and reached in with a grimace to push it. Some jaunty song rang throughout the seemingly empty house. In case

the neighbors were watching, he kept a friendly face as he left his card tucked behind the weatherstripping, the return date circled.

Woodford was another hour away. It was a nice drive, too, but for a deer narrowly missed. The next house was large and expensive and he felt embarrassed pulling the old Volvo into the driveway where it decided to sputter and squeal even worse than usual. On the arched door, a magnificent brass knocker—a three-toed raven's claw that rapped more than knocked. There were hushes and arguments behind it until finally it opened and a big man stepped out with a fast and long stride.

"You go on back," the big man said immediately.

"You must be mister Lutz then."

The two men stared at one another, one with his hand out, the other with his arms of woven rope crossed at his chest.

"Your father—"

"My father is *my* problem."

"He turned eighty last week."

"He did."

"It's a nice, long life."

The big man took a deep breath and blew it out in twin streams of white fog, as though his thick, red mustache had been extinguished.

"Mister Lutz, I understand your position. I do. But believe me, it's best to do this by appointment. It can be an... inconvenient...process otherwise." He held out a card. "For the client *and* their family."

"*Client*," Mr. Lutz mocked.

"Yes sir."

"I said no." The big man wadded up the card and threw it. "Now go."

"Mister Lutz, I'll have to—"

But the door slammed, the deadbolt sliding with a knock as loud as the raven's rap.

Inside the Volvo, he opened the Lutz folder and held up two forms, deciding finally on the *Missed Appointment 10-6-D*, rather than the *Refused Service 9-0-9*. Then he picked up the phone and tried Janie, but it rang three times, so he hung up.

Dairy Queen's the place for lunch. Good burgers. That's what everyone says. While he ate and let the inside heat melt his boots, a white van parked next to the Volvo and two young men dressed in blue uniforms badged with red and white crosses climbed down and came inside.

They walked up to the counter and ordered, but before they could pay, he intercepted them.

"I'd like to buy these gentlemen lunch," he said.

They exchanged looks. One had to look up, the other down.

"Sir?" asked the tall one.

"I'm with the Office," he said, holding out his hand.

"Servings."

Tall shook his hand, then Short did the same. Tall said, "Collection."

"Post process?"

"Pre," Short replied with reticence.

"Oh yeah." He let out a small whistle. "You boys out on a nine-oh-nine then?" He handed the clerk money.

"Yes sir," said Short.

"Probably one of mine. I do my best not to let it fall to you. You boys got the hard job."

They exchanged looks. "No sir," Short said. "I couldn't," he had to pause, "I don't know how you guys do it. Face to face like that."

All that could be given was a shrug. "Different talents, I suppose."

The moment began to turn awkward as they all waited at the counter.

Short spoke again, a little laugh riding his words. "I guess anything's better than Dispatch." He shuddered.

"Oh yeah. Dispatch isn't easy. Much easier when the client's on board. That's why I switched."

"You used to Dispatch?" asked Tall.

"Oh yeah. Seven years down there in the chambers. Those of us who did Inquiry during the war, that's where they put us."

Short and Tall exchanged an uncomfortable look.

"But me, I prefer the open road." He held his hand out flat and gave his biggest grin, but the two men only hunted the room for something else to look at. It probably would have been better to cite any number of other reasons for the switch, for the preference, but he was an honest man, and so he said the truth—It was the road alone.

"Well, I'll leave you boys to it," he said, feeling he was relieving them of his presence. "Enjoy your lunch and thanks for your service."

"You too sir," said Tall, though not quite as kindly as before.

He made good time to Blanchard. It was the last house of the day, and before he went up to the door he called Janie. This time she picked up.

"Hey now," she said.

"Hey now," he replied. Lionel's tiny cough filled the background. "How's he doing?"

"Rough day. Lots of coughing. Fever's up."

Then there was silence.

Finally, she spoke. "I can't do it, Glen."

He sighed softly.

She repeated herself. "I can't."

"We don't got a choice, Jane."

"Some stranger. It's just too much." Those heavy sobs came.

"Jane," he said and took a breath, "I'm doing it."

She sniffed and he could hear her wiping at her nose with her sweater, pulled over her thumb. "What?"

"I'm doing it. We'll file the paperwork like it was Cole but I'll do it. First thing in the morning."

She was quiet, and he could imagine her face, trying to see how this was in any way better.

"Did you hear me?" he asked.

"Yes." He hadn't expected the coldness, but he realized now that he should have.

"It's better this way. Otherwise—"

She hung up.

He opened the car door and took stock of the old house. It was poorly kept, the siding bare in places and patched by muddauber peaks, their would-be queens slumbering within. He waded through the foot of snow to the deathtrap steps, and they leaned as he climbed them. He paused before knocking, as if the door might fall down for it. But this was a business for knocking.

As he waited, he noticed he was standing on a well-worn welcome mat, though he doubted it meant him. He didn't have to knock again. The door opened, and a small, middle-aged man with a crown of baldness answered the door, eyes giant in thick glasses.

"You him?" the little man asked.

"Yeah, I'm him."

"She's in the back."

Glen followed the man into the kitchen. A magnet on the refrigerator said *Southern Wisconsin Chapter of American Butter Sculptors*, Member, with the phone number clearly confirming: 0091. Glen let out a small laugh.

The little man turned around, his offense plain.

"Sorry," Glen said. "Small world is all." Then he motioned ahead.

In the back, the woman was on a bed. Her face was glossy

and sinking, taut around its angular frame, like something had gone in through the back and sucked out all of what keeps the skin off the bone. She was shivering, her breath a kind of ragged half-snore.

"She your wife, then?" Glen asked softly.

"Yes."

Glen gave a nod and set the heavy, black case on the endtable with a careful thud. He pressed his thumb to the little dirty screen and it blinked green and the latches popped open. He raised the lid, flipped the red switch, then pressed the white button. The machine came to life with a soft whir. He peeled away the tamper seal of a little package, then opened it and pulled out a coil of tubing, affixing one end to the machine's brass nozzle—heavily encircled with labels and warnings—and the other around the woman's head, fitting the little nubs into her nose.

"Does it hurt her?" The little man asked.

"No," Glen said, this question his to answer some thousand times by now. "The sickness is hurting her. This ends that. So. We ready then?"

The little man wrung his hands together, worked his mouth around in an attempt to swallow. "There's no other way?"

Glen shook his head. "Only worse ones."

The little man lowered his head, then nodded. The machine gave a soft beep as Glen pushed the black button down. The woman's eyes slowly opened and she looked around, a thin smile playing at her lips. Her husband began to speak, as they always did when they saw their loved one smile like that, eyes sparkling and words seemingly balanced on quivering lips.

"She's entering euphoria," Glen said before anything else could be. "It comes just before the end."

The woman's eyes narrowed, blinked rapidly, then closed, and her hand fell just slightly—whatever last strength she had finally going to wherever it goes. The machine beeped softly, and its

Charges Remaining LED fell to 1.

"That's it," Glen said.

"That's it?"

"That's it. Now the Collectors come. I'll put in the call."

"She was my life," the little man said, a tear running down his cheek.

"I know," Glen said, "I'm sorry for your loss."

"What a world."

The latches of the suitcase clipped loudly. "Yeah. You can say that again." Chiding himself for insensitivity, he looked the little man in the eyes. "Better at home than in the chambers," he said. "Believe me."

Glen walked to the door and reached for the knob.

"Wait," the little man called.

Glen turned around.

"Do me too."

Glen sighed. This wasn't uncommon, and usually he had to consider it, but not so seriously as to risk the danger of temptation. But this time, he had other reasons for his refusal, so it came easier.

"No," he said. "No I'm afraid I can't do that."

"So I guess I'll see you in forty years."

"You could always get sick."

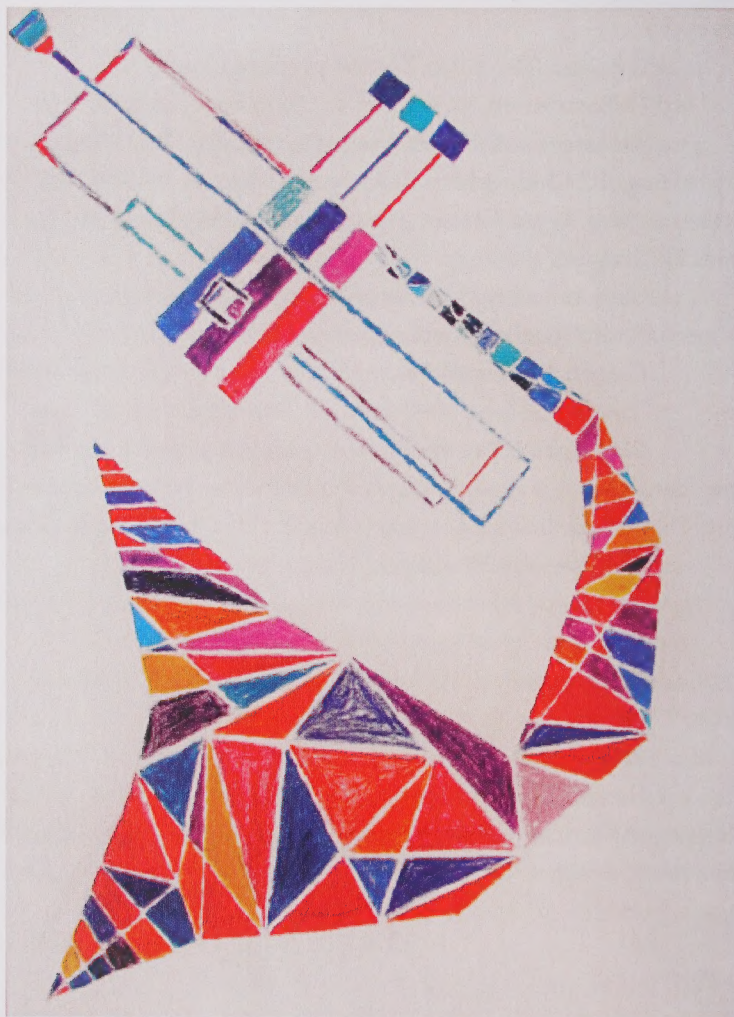
"Seems cruel. Only those who don't want to die seem to get to."

"Yeah," Glen said.

He walked out and saw that it had begun to snow. He opened the door, got inside, and for the first time he could remember, dreaded the drive ahead.

Trumpet Gets Down

Mark Damon Puckett



A Quiet Night In

Ian A. Kushner

A harsh wind howled and blew snow past the cabin located halfway down the mountain. The windows were covered in fog, and icicles hung from the sill. A terrible blizzard which had started hours before had dumped at least a foot of snow on the cabin, with more to come. Around the cabin was a small stable, and an outhouse. Both had lines leading to them, held up by stakes driven into the ground. Smoke billowed from the chimney of the cabin, reaching into the dark grey sky, darkening as the sun was falling slowly. Inside the cabin were two men, one sitting at a table, the other standing at the window looking out, both warming up from having been outside for the better part of two hours, laying lines, and stabling horses.

"Lucky you made it, y'know, b'fore the storm really rolled in... Gonna be a bad one. Won't surprise me if we ain't outta here for a few days," Zeke said, not looking up from the dominoes he was entertaining himself with before he had gone outside to help stable his guest's horse. He was a large, stocky man. The sort of man who did hard work for a living and lived for hard work. His face was scratchy with the beginnings of a beard, and his hair was short, very dark grey, and thin, his scalp almost visible under it.

Zeke looked up at his guest. He had arrived shortly after the snowfall began, a traveler heading down the mountain into Red Chapel. He was a tall, thin man, once wearing a heavy fur-lined coat made from corduroy, now dressed down to his black vest, red shirt and jeans, with a revolver dressing his hip. His face was narrow and sharp, his hair long, jet black and thick. He had a pencil-thin mustache.

"Yeah... s'pose so. Y'all don't know how far it is down the

mountain to Red Chapel do ya?—After the snow clears, ‘course,” the traveler asked, turning to look at Zeke from where he was looking before out the window at the stable.

Zeke shook his head then turned to look out the window. The snow was getting worse, coming down heavier. It was a thick, heavy, wet snow, the kind that began to melt, then would freeze over again to make travel impossible. Zeke just shook his head and clicked his tongue, “Ain’t happenin’ any time soon. Normally would take about a day... day and half by horse.” He paused and thought, “Weather like this, though? Mmm... I’d reckon y’all ain’t gettin’ down this mountain in one piece before the week’s out... Longer, maybe.” Zeke turned back to his guest, who was swearing under his breath and scowling. “Say, don’t think I ever caught a name. I’m Ezekiel.”

The stranger sighed and turned to a pot which was hanging over a fire. Some savory concoction of beef and vegetables was simmering and filling the air of the cabin with wonderfully zesty smells. “Well... that’s just dandy...” He grumbled some more quiet swears and reached for the wooden spoon laying across the pot. “Folks call me Cromwell...” he muttered, stirring the stew and wafting the aroma towards him. “How long’s this been cookin’?” He took a taste, and was delighted by the rich flavor he found.

Zeke couldn’t help but laugh and smirk a bit. “Well, well... Made it myself. Started it this mornin’. Saw the clouds comin’, figured I’d be here a while, oughta make somethin’ that’ll last me.” Zeke leaned forward on one arm, the other hand going onto his lap as he eyeballed Cromwell. “What’s got ya goin’ to Red Chapel anyhow?”

Cromwell turned and adjusted the handkerchief tied around his neck. “Stew’s good...” he mumbled before moving to look around for bowls. “As for my business? Well, y’see, my momma’s down there. Recently took ill... and y’know...” He made a rolling gesture with his hand as he found two bowls and placed

them on top of the wood stove. "What kinda son would I be if I didn't go down to spend time with her? Take care of her, y'know?"

Zeke watched Cromwell for a moment before he leaned over and began pulling spoons and sporks out of a wooden cup on the edge of the table and began setting the table with one hand. "Ain't that kind of you, y'know—"

"What about you?" Cromwell interjected. "Middle of nowhere, lodge on the side of the mountain?" Cromwell placed the bowls of stew on the table and sat across from Zeke. "What are you doin' up here?"

Zeke rolled his eyes a bit and slowly, deliberately ate a chunk of a potato while watching Cromwell carefully. "Well, seein' as I own this lodge and am letting you stay here and puttin' food in your belly as well as lodging and feeding your horse, I don't see as I'm particularly suspicious." He had a long, slurping spoonful of the wonderful, meaty broth he'd been developing over the course of the day. He grunted happily, "Damn good..." He then cleared his throat. "But, iff'n ya must know... I'm the sheriff down the mountain in Red Chapel. Takin' myself a small vacation..." He looked out the window, "Looks like it got a bit bigger though..." He said with a chuckle.

Cromwell nearly choked and coughed. "I—" he cleared his throat "— I see. Well... Mister Sheriff, sir. Awful irresponsible to be... takin' a vacation like this, ain't it?" Cromwell narrowed his eyes. "I dun heard some rumblings. Gang headin' Red Chapel-wards." Cromwell reached for the coffee pot behind him on the woodstove and began pouring himself a cup. "Robbers, thieves, and murderers, I hear. They hit Goodspring less than a month ago..." He took a sip of the burnt coffee. "Seem like the sheriff bein' outta town would be awful convenient for such a gang to show up." Cromwell trailed off and took another bite.

Zeke nodded, "Yeah, s'pose it would be." He had another spoon of broth. "To be honest with ya, I am worried. But if I ain't

takin' care of myself, how can I take care of my town?"

Cromwell sighed softly and reached under the table while eating more stew. His free hand gripped his revolver and slowly drew it from the holster. "Well... lucky for you, I guess... that gang probably ain't in much better shape than us."

Zeke laughed and nodded. "Damn right. Lucky you're in here instead of out there, ain't ya?" He put his spoon down and leaned forward, motioning Cromwell to lean closer. "But y'know the real reason why I ain't so worried?"

Cromwell leaned forward, furrowing his brow and pulling back the hammer on his gun, pointing it under the table. His furrowed brow gave way to a sly smile. "Why'sat? Ya got a deputy or some such down there?" Zeke began laughing, and Cromwell soon followed. Zeke was shaking his head when suddenly there was an earsplitting BANG which rattled the windows and seemed to give the wind itself pause for just a moment.

Cromwell wasn't laughing anymore, but Zeke was still grinning. "Just so happens, the leader of that gang knocked on my door not three hours ago. Found his wanted poster not too long ago." He paused and placed his smoking gun on the table while Cromwell held the wound in his gut and fell off his chair. "Cromwell Jenkins. Wanted: Dead or Alive." Zeke picked his spoon up and had another bite. Cromwell just stared up coldly. "Too bad the rest of his gang couldn't die warm like him."

Un

Mark Damon Puckett

An impatient MAN, 40, sits at a café table, sips espresso and looks at his watch. About to leave when YOUNGER MAN, 35, arrives. Unshaven, uncombed hair, untucked shirt: "un" all-around. He spots MAN and slow-mo jogs over to him. MAN stands. They shake hands.

SCENE 1

MAN

Are you late to everything?

YOUNGER MAN

Well...these kinds of things that I can't stand...yes, usually.

MAN (sits)

Funny.

YOUNGER MAN

It doesn't *feel* funny.

WAITER

May I help you?

YOUNGER MAN

Yes, I'll have four shots of absinthe.

WAITER (icily)

We don't serve absinthe... Are you famous?

YOUNGER MAN

Absolutely not. How about espresso then? Unleaded.

MAN

Why do we say unleaded anymore? Is there still leaded?

YOUNGER MAN

Flint drinking water.

MAN

Now then...unto the serious stuff.

YOUNGER MAN

Un we go.

SCENE 2

YOUNGER MAN

You never were much of a big brother.

MAN (thinks for a second)

Clearly not. Remember, our goal today is to unearth everything.

YOUNGER MAN (pulls out pad from back pocket, writes diligently)

"...to unearth everything."

MAN

This is our final talk like this. We need to air it all. You can't keep up this falsity.

YOUNGER MAN

"...need to..." (looks up eagerly)

MAN

Air. Air it all.

YOUNGER MAN

Got it.

MAN

I'll start.

YOUNGER MAN

I'll take notes.

MAN

Try to listen, too. To yourself.

YOUNGER MAN

I'll try, but I can't guarantee anything. In fact, I'm not listening now.

MAN (listing, using fingers to count)

First, we'll talk about family. Then, relationships outside of family.

Then, we'll talk about us.

YOUNGER MAN

Un?

MAN

No, us. *Us*.

YOUNGER MAN

Ohhh, I thought you said un, you know, French for "one."

MAN

Us, I said.

SCENE 3

MAN

I'll have to say that I don't like the people you're bringing home.

YOUNGER MAN

Um, when was the last time you were *at* my home?

MAN

Irrelevant!

YOUNGER MAN

Reel it back in. I'm trying to outline all this [holds up notepad].

MAN

Unbelievable! The family is worried about you. That's why I'm here.

YOUNGER MAN

Me? I?

MAN

Yes.

YOUNGER MAN

And why is that?

MAN

You're going down the wrong path.

YOUNGER MAN

Am I now? What path is that?

MAN

You have a pathology.

YOUNGER MAN

Oh no I don't. I don't even know what that is.

MAN

Like, you have a sickness. A doctor-endorsed one and everything.

YOUNGER MAN

I don't think so. You have me confused with your wife again.

MAN

We are worried.

YOUNGER MAN

Who?

MAN

Me, mostly.

YOUNGER MAN

First person singular then. Not first person plural. For a second there, I thought you said "oui."

MAN

Yes, you're right, more I than we. We as in us, not oui as in yes.

YOUNGER MAN

So, *you're* worried, yes?

MAN

Oui. Oh, stop it. You're confusing me. Maybe you're just worried about you.

YOUNGER MAN

United, I stand.

MAN

The fact of the matter is that you are sick. You keep choosing the wrong people, people even sicker than you.

YOUNGER MAN

Now, that I can't help. It's in my blood. Our father, you know ...

MAN

Take for instance that one girl.

YOUNGER MAN

Which one? You need specific examples to back up your thesis statement.

MAN

You know, um, the one with the knives.

YOUNGER MAN

Oh yeah, Sally [reflective]. She was sweet.

MAN

Sweet?!

YOUNGER MAN

Point of clarification: those were a circus hobby not a profession.

MAN

You don't fall in love with circus women with knives!

YOUNGER MAN

I wasn't. In love, that is.

MAN

Then why did you waste those three years?

YOUNGER MAN (shrugging)

I believe in the circus?

MAN

This is what I'm talking about. Unconscionable. Love is the upward glance.

YOUNGER MAN

Who says love is the upward glance?

MAN

The love people.

YOUNGER MAN

The *love* people?

MAN

You need someone you respect.

YOUNGER MAN

I don't think so. I can't really function around people. I not only have voices inside my head, but near my head and beside my head. Behind my head too.

MAN

Yes, I know the feeling. We *are* related. However, you need to go through a serious change in your character soon.

YOUNGER MAN

Being my brother doesn't give you governance over me.

MAN

I am trying to help you. [Scoffing] Governance, pshh.

YOUNGER MAN

Where's the waiter?

MAN

There was never a waiter.

YOUNGER MAN

Never? What about you? You help people a lot but don't even have a job. Your daughter hates you. You don't shave your ear hair. You mispronounce words like faux pas.

MAN

Don't bring up the fox pass thing.

YOUNGER MAN

I'm very tired of you thinking you need to assist me with my life. Help yourself!!!!

MAN (stares at him for a good five seconds)

Wow. Which is Mom upside down.

YOUNGER MAN

I am a merciless monkey. I'm just waiting to pounce, my friend!

MAN

That's good. Get it out.

SCENE 4

YOUNGER MAN

Can we talk philosophy for a minute?

MAN

Oh god no. It's time to talk about [timer sounds] Mom.

YOUNGER MAN

Mom.... Good old Mom.

MAN

We need to speak of her. She never liked you.

YOUNGER MAN

I know.

MAN

You were too similar to her.

YOUNGER MAN

Yes, I'm aware.

MAN

You should have never spoken the truth around her. You never speak the truth around relatives. Don't you know that?

YOUNGER MAN

I know.

MAN

You were supposed to leave her in peace. Why did you act that way around her?

YOUNGER MAN

I just don't know.

MAN

She pushed you, I'll admit. You missed a chance to forgive her though. You let that time pass.

YOUNGER MAN

What should I have done better?

MAN

No idea.

YOUNGER MAN

What do I do now, brother?

MAN

Brother?

YOUNGER MAN

I've called you that before.

MAN

I liked it this time.

YOUNGER MAN (weakly smiles, as if the compliment hurts)

I do spend a lot of time alone.

MAN

You only have to wake up tomorrow. Go to the mirror.

YOUNGER MAN

I'm listening.

MAN

Look at yourself. And do one thing.

YOUNGER MAN

Which is?

MAN

Stop being by yourself.

YOUNGER MAN

How?

MAN

Quit going to cafés and pretending you have a brother, for one. You live and hate too much in your head. You are alone. There is no me. There is barely a you.

YOUNGER MAN

Bye brother.

MAN

I'm not your brother.

YOUNGER MAN

No brother?

MAN

I have to go. It's uneven, all of it.

YOUNGER MAN

Un—

MAN

You pay no honor to my death with your unsanity.

YOUNGER MAN

I'm unsane?

MAN

At times ...yes.

YOUNGER MAN

Can it be undone?

MAN

Maybe.

YOUNGER MAN

No brother at all?

MAN

No one but you.

MAN stands and gives YOUNGER MAN's neck a squeeze. He leaves. YOUNGER MAN sits alone. Body shakes as he holds back himself. A sip of coffee. Solo tableau.

Period.

Nadia Stottlemeyer

Splash of bright crimson ripples across the canvas.
Georgia O'Keeffe blooms in scarlet unfold.
Translucent petals suspended, expanding like the universe
While glistening rubies fall through the water.

Drip, drip, dripping blood oozes,
Viscous with globs, smearing
On skin in a sticky muck.

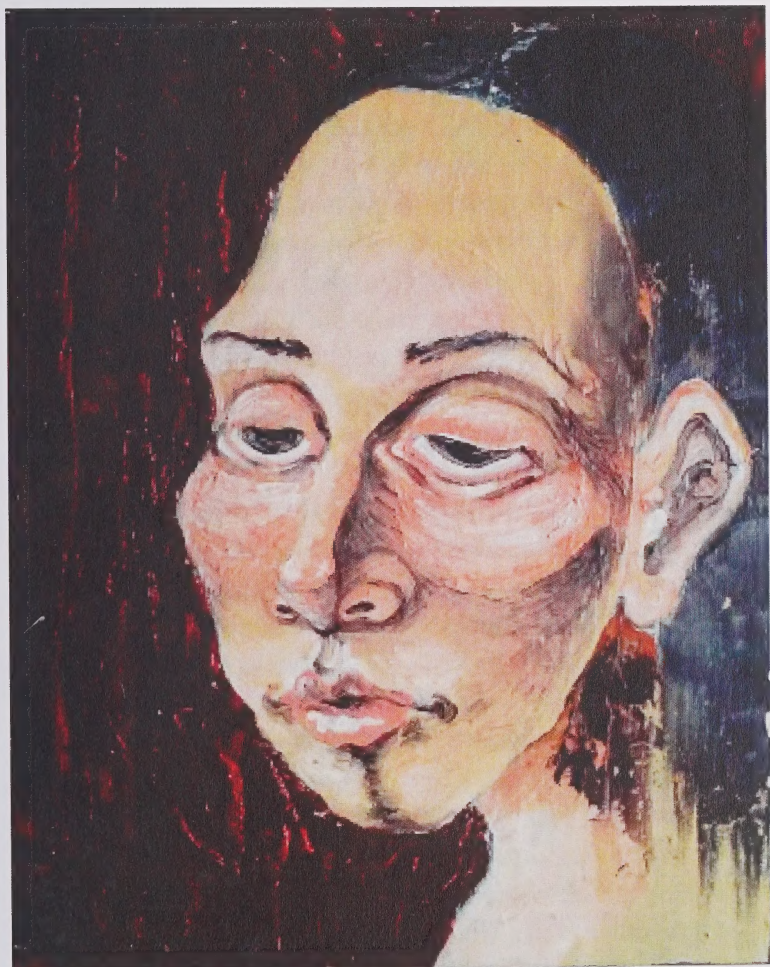
Swollen, pregnant with pain
An angry being lashes out
From within, crushing organs.

A dagger pierces vulnerable flesh,
An electric jolt of hot pain
Extinguishes breath, quiets time.

I emerge from a shower, cleansed of womanhood.
Electric heat-pad infuses strength into my core.
Cocooned by velvety blankets, I sip chamomile tea.
Some chocolate and Netflix, and this is less obscene.

Daphne

Minna Honkakoski



Body Piercing, Permanent Makeup, Fine Jewelry

Ellen J. Perry

*Some guy broke her heart and how her heart did ache,
so she went to the tent of the lady of the snakes
who gave her a potion and she drank it in.
After that, her heart never ached again;
after that, her heart never ached again.*

—Patty Griffin, “Trapeze” (2007)

Sheila Winston had two jobs, one that was her calling and one she tolerated. Five days a week she worked at her second cousin Earl's shop doing permanent makeup and keeping the books. In the evenings she drove home, fed her cat Tilly, watered the garden, fired up the grill, and turned her “Tarot Psychic—Open” sign on. Earl's sister Gail had her husband make the flashing neon-blue sign for Sheila in exchange for working on Gail's eyebrows. “The Brow Wow ain't cutting it no more,” Gail said of her once-favorite product. So Sheila went to work. In fact, she worked on everybody in town, both at Earl's shop and then later at her house on a narrow gravel road, even though most of her neighbors in the small coastal town of Slatton, South Carolina wouldn't admit to darkening the doors of either. Never mind that they'd seen each other coming and going; people kept their eyes lowered in transit, abiding faithfully by the Slatton code of *not drawing unnecessary attention* to things that were unusual at best and sinful at worst.

Folks stumbled around some after tourist season, trying to keep the bills paid, but most found their footing one way or another. Earl got the idea that he could open up a tattoo shop and

soon discovered he had a real talent with body piercing. He could fancy up nostrils and navels way better than his first employee, Cindy Ann, who'd gotten mad about something and quit right in the middle of a tricky barbell job. Then came Gail with her jewelry line (named "Gail's Goodies" by her oldest daughter) and finally Earl talked Sheila into joining their little group. For years, right there in the east Slatton strip mall, they worked as a team at *Earl's Place: Body Piercing, Permanent Makeup, Fine Jewelry*. The shop stayed busy with locals and tourists alike.

Gail and Earl's rambunctious ways nearly drove Sheila crazy because she needed quiet to do her best work, especially when it came to the delicate eye and lip areas. Sheila had been told during her training classes in Columbia that she had a steady hand. For sure she valued precision. But every time she took a deep breath and got focused on somebody's worn-out, sun-damaged, wrinkled face, there was interference from Earl, Gail, or any number of people wandering in—often after they'd been to a service at McKinney's Funeral Home across the street and had "news" (gossip) to share. Recently it was her old high school classmate Polly Anderson who tested Sheila's patience.

At about 4:30 on a Tuesday afternoon, Sheila heard the door chime and tried to duck into the shop's tiny break room. Too late, though—Polly made a beeline for Sheila even though Gail always liked to be the first to greet customers.

"Hey, Polly," Sheila said. "You look awful pretty and fixed up." Earl hooted and whistled from the checkout counter.

"Oh, I've been at the funeral home," Polly said, winking at Earl. "I'm heading back over there after I pick out a pair of Gail's earrings. I just realized I forgot mine and don't want to drive all the way home." Polly shifted gears quickly. "Ain't it awful about Rodney. Lord! You heard anything about how Martha's taking it? She's such a frail little thing."

"About as well as can be expected, I guess," Sheila said,

remembering with satisfaction her most recent tarot reading with Rodney's wife Martha.

Polly shook her head. "Well, Rodney's heart got him in the end, Don said. His heart just gave right out. He keeled over at the supper table. The paramedics got there fast, even in that awful thunderstorm, but they couldn't do nothing about it."

Sheila watched Polly sip on too-sour lemonade that the funeral home people always provided during visitations. As Polly chattered with Gail about whether gold or silver would look better with her outfit, Sheila saw her chance and darted to the break room. Snacking on peanuts, she thought about how Polly went to Atlanta last year to get treatment for her nerves—the same time Rodney was "out of town" at a plumber's convention. Everyone put the pieces together but danced around it, not wanting to gossip about Martha, such a soft and sweet soul (except during prayer meeting when it was acceptable to talk about people because, well, they were being lifted up to the Lord).

Martha was a saint for taking Rodney back after the Polly affair, everybody whispered, and Sheila comforted Martha during her first tarot session. "Martha, you deserve better," Sheila said. But Martha didn't believe it. *Now here's Rodney, cold in his open casket across the street at McKinney's*, Sheila thought, *Polly drinking the funeral home lemonade like none of that Atlanta business ever happened*. Sheila wished Polly would go on back over there and take her place in the snaking line.

Even after Polly decided to buy some gold hoops, though, she wouldn't leave the store. She called out to Sheila to come look, bragging on the earrings as if she had designed and hammered them out herself. Sheila knew Gail would take her time wrapping up the jewelry, a favorite ploy she said gave customers time to think if they needed a bracelet or necklace to match. Meantime, Polly hovered near the break room door where she could keep the conversation with Sheila going and still flirt with Earl. "How's your

acid reflux, Sheila?"

Sheila forced a little smile in case Polly was eyeing her. "I'm trying some new herbal medicine," she said. "It's helping a lot. You doing ok?" She opened and closed the filing cabinets where she kept the shop records, hoping Polly would get the message.

"Well, I'm holding my own. It's James I'm worried about," said Polly, who never recognized even the clearest signals. "You know he's twenty years older than us, and his age is really showing now that he's in his 70s."

Sheila put her files away and started wiping down the microwave, knowing she was in for it. She could shut the break room door but decided against it, remembering that Gail and Earl were all about listening to and flattering the customers. Polly dearly loved to talk about her husband James's various afflictions.

"Did something happen to him?" Sheila asked.

"His mind's going," Polly said. "The doctor don't know whether it's the war scrapnel or the Altimers."

"I hate to hear it." Sheila closed the microwave and leaned to look around Polly, hoping to spot a customer in need of help. All she could see was Earl doing some kind of jig he'd learned at a recent community center dance.

"Only the Lord knows what the problem is with James and his mind, I told the doctor," Polly sighed. She ambled over toward Earl, who'd gotten frustrated with the dance steps and was making a racket behind the cash register.

Word was that James went crazy the day after he married Polly, never mind the Vietnam-era "scrapnel." Polly just used that as an excuse for him being drunk half the time. *Look at her over there cozying up to Earl now, Sheila thought, drinking that lemonade sour as she is, bitter like the acid reflux that used to plague me nights.*

Sheila emerged from the break room when she heard the door chime, thinking she was safe. But there stood Polly with the

door half open, one foot in the shop and one out.

"Listen, Sheila, come back to church," Polly said bluntly. "We're concerned. This stuff you're doing is dangerous, this fortune-telling and tarot card business. You're leading people down the wrong path, getting them to believe you got all the answers when really only Jesus does. Preacher Calvin drives by regular, says there's cars over at your place late at night till you turn off that flashing sign."

"Woo hoo, witchy woman, she got the moon in her eye," sang Earl, off-key but doing his best Eagles imitation, which Polly ignored.

"I'm just worried for you, Sheila. We're all worried."

Gail swatted at Earl, who'd started to sing and shimmy again, and for once Sheila was grateful for their craziness and especially for Gail's barging in. "Polly, come back next week, hear?" Gail said. "I'll have some silver hoops ready by then and you can see if you want a matching pair, half off."

"Ok, thanks," Polly said. "I guess I'll get on back over there before James and them start missing me." She walked out with obvious reluctance after a last cautionary look in Sheila's direction and another sly wink at Earl. Sheila decided she'd give Gail a free reading for creating the diversion.

In the unusual lag in customers that followed Polly's exit, Sheila thought about how Polly's hypocrisy had always infuriated her, which led to her considering all the ways she might have responded to Polly's appeal to return to church and give up the devil's work. First off, she could have informed Polly that Preacher Calvin was a regular client who begged her to read the cards or swing the pendulum and tell him what to do about his wasted life. Sheila could have described the tender moments when she lit rue candles and put together potions and protection sachets for people in great need: those who were grieving, lost, afraid, lonely, betrayed. She could have told how she brewed teas to help Polly's

husband James sober up and settle his nerves before going home after the second shift to face his cheating wife, day after day, year after year.

To defend her passion and give Polly something true to take to prayer meeting, Sheila might have revealed all of these secrets had Gail not intervened, but she knew without a doubt that she'd take one secret to her grave: how two weeks ago during the dark moon, after Martha pulled the Three of Swords card and they looked together at the picture of a heart pierced three times against the backdrop of a heavy rain, they went out with lanterns to Sheila's garden and gathered ingredients.

"It's such a pretty shrub, so soft and sweet," Martha said of Sheila's pink and white nerium oleander.

"To look at it," Sheila agreed, "you'd never know it could break a man's heart."

Bloated with Insecurity

Laura Grace Dame

I feel like a refugee at this fireworks display
My dinosaur skin stretched across my bones
I'm a klutz
Limbs always mottled with the proof
And I sit cross-legged
On the itchy grass
Watching the neon sparks and smoke
Draw on the backdrop of the sky
And I think
About how everyone else has everything figured out
Everyone else is so beautifully put together
I'm the only confused one
I'm the only ugly one
I'm the only one who isn't confident in who they are
My brain picks up lie after lie after lie
And I devour them like they are the most delicious thing I've ever
tasted

I've been enjoying this same diet
For many years now
I don't know when I began the sickly consumption
But I'm becoming fat on this self-deprecating diet
I'm becoming skinny on this self-punishing routine

It's all such a nasty brain game
As I try to figure out who I am
It's a cycle without an end
As I try to get things straight

Get my ducks in a row

But that's hard to do

When you can't figure out which ducks are your own

Redbud

Bronwen G. McCormick



The Apartment

Jessie Crews

Claire is splayed across the tile floor of her kitchen, feeling like quite the fool.

She's lying on her back, in the same spot she fell, but her neck feels a bit funny, so she keeps her head turned to one side, cheek pressed against the tile floor. Still, she's watching, out of one eye at least, as the small brown bug scampers up the folds of a curtain and across the stippled ceiling above her. Her spine feels achy and cold against the travertine tiles where her shirt's bunched up. She has a strange impulse to tug her top down, suddenly shy about her exposed midsection, as if there were someone there to see, and even if there were, what a thing to consider when there are bumps and bruises and perhaps even broken bones to assess.

She tries moving, but ribbons of pain are shooting out in all directions and it's all she can do to wiggle her fingers, so for now she gives up on trying to stand. And, truthfully, assessing her injuries feels less important to her in this moment than the other task, the one that landed her on the floor in the first place:

She has to kill that final, fucking cockroach.

Claire can't say for certain, but she's pretty sure the roaches first appeared a full decade ago, in the spring of 2009, when she'd just moved into the loft apartment.

The apartment felt open and artsy and important in all the ways Claire hadn't known she craved until she first toured the place with her real estate agent friend, Miriam. "If you want it," Miriam had said, "you'd better say so. A place like this'll go fast." And Claire believed her. So say so she did.

The loft was perfect—all high ceilings and exposed piping and brick walls on one side of the bedroom and a curved wall on

the other that Claire envisioned painting a deep, moody blue with a name like Moonstone, Baltic, or Indigo Evening as soon as she signed the lease.

But her favorite loft detail by far was the floor—beautifully imperfect original heart pine hardwoods laced with long slices of tree rings and inky, dark knots that Claire imagined absorbed all sorts of secrets and stories and would later study in great detail after a few glasses of wine. The floor was unfinished and rough-hewn and hard to keep clean, with new scratches appearing at every scuff of a heel and dust forever collecting into the crevices. But beautiful was the important part—who cared about practicality when you weren't yet thirty?—and the floors and the loft that came with them were all Claire's, so long as she kept tucking the \$950 a month payment into the landlord's letterbox.

For the first time, thanks to her first real job after grad school, Claire was earning money to pay rent and cable and car insurance with money left over. It was a little embarrassing really, how something as simple as a paycheck could wield so much power over her psyche. How it could shift Claire from feeling like a phony, a paper doll, make-believing her way through the world into a full-blown, tangible, real-live adult.

But it was true. The money made a difference. Claire could now begin her weekends with half-decent wine that she hadn't just picked up at a shitty gas station and order pizza with arugula and goat cheese that had been wood or brick or stone or some other kind of fancy-fired instead of settling for some sad, one-topping delivery special for \$7.99.

Claire knew these were silly, materialistic details, but still. They felt weirdly significant to her, symbolic of a shifting into adulthood, into a new stage of feeling *with it*, *together*, and *on top of things*. She imagined an envious, single-pizza-topping sort of friend saying one or more of these phrases to her over brunch one Sunday (because New Claire also planned on brunching more in

this new life of hers).

“Oh, Claire.” The friend would say, while lazily peeling layers off a croissant. “I’m so jealous—you’re just so with it. So together. Really on top of things.” And although Claire felt immediately embarrassed by how proud even the imagined conversation made her feel, she couldn’t resist replaying different iterations in her mind a few times before moving on to the next thing.

Moving into the loft represented a sort of turning point for Claire; the high-ceilinged, open-aired space in apartment 203A seemed like the perfect setting for the rest of her life to begin unfolding. Surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows and curved walls and hip, friendly neighbors, she could twirl and lounge and breathe and create and become whatever she was supposed to be in this life of hers.

Yes, remembering it all, Claire knows. That was when she saw the first cockroach.

It hadn’t seemed like all that big a deal, that first sighting. In fact, Claire barely even registered it as something out of the ordinary—this small shiny insect skittering out from behind her kitchen faucet, where the caulk was slightly peeling away from the countertop.

The peeling part—that was probably from all the splashing Claire created while doing the dishes. She had many talents, but scrubbing dishes—pots and pans in particular—in a serene and organized manner, was not one of them. In fact, when she first spotted the roach, Claire was washing dishes with her usual fervor, attacking a Pyrex dish with a scrub brush, waging her small war against the most persistent clinger-ons of eggplant parm.

The roach, that first one, had run down the cabinet door and promptly disappeared into the AC vent. Claire stopped mid-scrub to watch it go and then thought, well, that’s that. She did make a mental note to add more caulk behind the sink and to try scrubbing less aggressively, but if someone had asked her about the

roach later that evening, she would have likely said, "What roach?"

In addition to the arrival of the first roach, another significant detail that occurred that spring was that Claire begrudgingly welcomed another roommate into her loft. She hadn't planned on it. She didn't really need to split the rent two ways each month. She didn't even have a spare bedroom, not really, unless you counted the small office where she kept extra throw pillows and boxes she hadn't yet gotten around to unpacking. She didn't want a roommate. But the roommate happened nonetheless.

This was how it happened. Gwynne, Claire's thirty-something year-old co-worker, had just been dumped by her boyfriend of, well, Claire wasn't sure how many years but at least years, plural, and Gwynne was distraught. During their morning pitch meeting on the Tuesday after the breakup, Gwynne, shaking in her chair and murmuring quiet nonsense to herself, had knocked over her coffee and begun crying uncontrollably into her cronut in front of the entire marketing team.

It wasn't a great moment, and Claire knew then that if Gwynne asked, the obliger in her would agree to go out for drinks or meet for lunch and watch Gwynne cry into another lovely food item that'd be wasted just as the tear-soaked cronut had been, no matter how much Claire would just rather not. What she didn't anticipate, however, was that, instead of asking Claire out for a drink or to lunch, Gwynne would show up at her doorstep late one weeknight asking if she could move in.

Maybe if Gwynne had texted her instead, or emailed, or even asked at work by peeking over the side of the cubicle wall they shared with a, "Hey, here's a wild idea..." and asked to be her roommate, then Claire would still have been taken off guard, sure, but surely she would've had the wherewithal to pause, act as though she were carefully considering the pros and cons of the proposition, and then with an apologetic head tilt say, "I'm sorry, but I don't think so, G."

But there Gwynne was at her apartment door, duffel bag in hand, big-eyed and unwashed hair and pleading, and even though all Claire wanted was to flop back down on the couch and watch *Sex in the City* reruns without her pants on, she couldn't say that to Gwynne, so instead she said: "Okay. Come on in."

"Oh my god, thank you!" Gwynne said, dragging her duffel across the heart pines and crashing onto the couch with a heavy sigh. "You, my friend, are a real lifesaver." Then, "Hey, do you have any snacks? All this sadness makes me crave salty food."

By the following Monday, Gwynne had moved the odds and ends of her life into the office space and claimed the cabinets to the left of the stove and the drawers to the right of the dishwasher. Into the cabinets Gwynne shoved graham crackers and Fritos and ready rice and peeled tomatoes and pimentos, all stacked with utter abandon. Claire quickly learned to duck and prepare for a potential food avalanche any time she opened one of the doors, which she shouldn't have been doing anyway, given that instead of containing her own sweetly organized rows of spices and tea varietals, these cabinets were now Gwynne's.

In the bathroom they now shared, Gwynne lined the sink with an array of serums, skin creams, and hair bands, along with small nail clippers for her fingers, a bigger set of clippers for her toes, and three different kinds of floss. Gwynne had a habit of leaving the door ajar and humming Christmas songs while relieving herself, and once, after being subjected to a particularly enthusiastic rendition of "Deck the Halls," Claire asked her why, and Gwynne had replied, "Oh, it helps me relax into the moment." Christmas music wasn't Claire's favorite in December, much less April, but she didn't figure it was worth telling that to Gwynne.

The second roach sighting happened shortly after Claire stumbled onto Gwynne, erm, making herself quite at home on Claire's couch a few days later. The couch was her great aunt's, whom Claire had been named after, and although it didn't quite

mesh with her own modern design sensibilities, it was a cheery, sunshine-y yellow with oversized cushions that hugged Claire in a way that she would come to expect from all couches, only to be disappointed. At any rate, there was Gwynne, pants unzipped, eyes glued to her laptop, deeply immersed in her own private venture and therefore unaware that Claire was there too, keys in one hand, pad thai in the other.

Claire dropped the keys, maybe accidentally, maybe to make herself known, even she didn't know which, but thankfully that was enough to jolt Gwynne out of her reverie of self-pleasure.

"Oh, shiii...sorry, I, um, sorry," Gwynne muttered, buttoning her pants and ducking out of the room. Claire kept her eyes to the floor as Gwynne shuffled away, and it was then that she saw the second roach, followed by a third, fourth, and then fifth—a near caravan, traversing her beloved, beautiful hardwood floors as though it were the Gobi Desert.

Claire watched the roaches go, briefly thinking she ought to squash them with her shoe or smash them with a magazine, but the act seemed far too visceral and violent. She imagined the slight crunch they'd make upon contact, and what if it weren't a clean kill? What if, when she lifted the shoe or magazine or whatever, legs were still flailing in a confused sort of anguish as the bevy of roach souls left their earthly bodies?

Which led to her next consideration—would the roaches' insides seep out? Would she be able to dispose of the remains with a simple tissue swipe, or would the process be more involved? She couldn't bear the thought of any of this—so she shook the images—of both the imagined roach family massacre and Gwynne's very real couch activities—out of her head and retreated to her bedroom, hoping that was the end of both of her problems.

Claire couldn't bring herself to kill the roaches that night, any more than she could suggest to Gwynne that she ought to take her self-stimulation sessions behind closed doors. Doing so would

be painful, and plus, these problems were likely to resolve themselves. The roaches were retreating, she was sure of it--the caravan had clearly been headed toward the door. And Gwynne, well, how embarrassing. She'd wouldn't do it again.

Claire would learn in the coming months that 1. Gwynne would absolutely do it again. On more than one impossibly awkward occasion. And 2. The roaches were not in fact retreating. Claire would also learn a lot—an awful, entomologist-level lot—about roaches.

German cockroaches, to be precise, which is what the many pest control experts she called upon all confirmed was the breed she was dealing with. Claire began by seeking out companies advertising the most natural, Earth-friendly approaches, but these worked about as well as Claire not squashing them did. So, the pest control folks kept coming that spring, each armed with their own approach they swore was best, but the roaches kept coming too.

German cockroaches are unique for several reasons, Claire learned. They are much smaller than their American cockroach counterparts and can move at impressive speeds, covering up to three miles in a single day. They are also much harder to get rid of than other pests, and as she heard from many an exterminator, once you have an infestation, German cockroaches are all but impossible to get rid of.

And then it was summer, and with the sticky, windows-open warmth of the season came a new wave of six-legged interlopers. Claire now understood *encroaching* in the truest sense. She'd spy one on the ceiling sometimes while eating cereal, or scaling the stack of cookbooks she kept on the buffet. Several would scurry out from behind the utensil crock each time she opened the microwave. A couple of times, she tried sweeping a few into a dustpan then running outside with them. But, the loft's hallways were long, and the roaches had always fled by the time she got to the exit.

Claire also learned that female German cockroaches produce around 200 offspring during their one-year lifespan. They can survive underwater for more than forty minutes without drowning. They can also live for a full week without their heads before succumbing to death by dehydration.

It was all too much.

Other parts of loft living that had also been too much for Claire:

Gwynne bringing home a parrot who mimicked only Claire.

A roach swan diving into the soup meant for Claire's sick neighbor.

Gwynne sitting on the kitchen counter, clipping her toenails into the sink because "it was cleaner that way."

A roach peeking out from behind a wedge of brie on the beautiful charcuterie board Claire had spent hours prepping for her work's Christmas party.

Gwynne losing her job, then falling behind on rent, then not paying rent at all, until finally, after six months, moving out to move in with her new boyfriend but not taking the parrot with her.

And then: A string of Claire's own poor romantic relationship choices, moving out of the lofts, then out of state, then into a new job that paid well but left Claire feeling like life was both speeding by and standing still all at once and then another move and a "Yes, okay boss," to later hours at the office even now with kids because the brick ranch was old but had a hefty mortgage because they'd wanted the best school district and anyway, Claire had never been one to argue or make waves.

And through it all—five moves, four partners, three jobs, two kids, and a partridge, no a parrot, in a pear tree—the roaches stayed. They crawled into cereal boxes, nested in the toaster tray, hid in the folds of cloth napkins, hopped gleefully into moving boxes, and scaled the length of every single one of Claire's many

kitchen cabinets over the course of that decade, taunting, haunting, persisting, resisting.

Claire now knows, lying on the kitchen floor, that she should have squashed that first roach. And the quintet that came after. She should have told Gwynne, "I'm sorry, but no," on the doorstep, as Gwynne peed in time to "Little Drummer Boy" with the door swung wide, and when Gwynne was zipping up her pants post-self pleasure. No to the bird, to the boss, to the boyfriends. "I'm sorry, but no." No. Squish, Crunch, Swipe, Freedom.

She tries saying it aloud, slowly—"No-o-oh." Her cheek squishes against the floor, exaggerating the feeling of her mouth giving life to the word. "No!" she shouts, then winces at the pain. Claire's not sure what had caused the roaches to finally disappear, but they had, or so she thought. Until today. She'd been dotting the calendar for ninety-two days of glorious, twirl-worthy, life-affirming, roach-free living that had made all parts of Claire's life feel easier. It seemed ridiculous, but it was true.

But now, now the roach prances forth, as if intrigued by Claire bellowing "Nos" to no one, until it is eye to eye with her, its antennae tentatively scoping out the air between them.

No.

Everything hurts. It is all she can do to wiggle her fingers, and so, in one deliberate movement, Claire lifts up those fingers just above the roach and slams one very obliging thumb of hers downward.

Yes.

There's a crunch and an ooze, just as she'd imagined there'd be. The roach remains are stuck to her thumb, but Claire doesn't mind like she thought she would. Perhaps the roach is leaving its earthly body. But something is leaving Claire too, and now she is laughing. She doesn't feel with it. Or together. Or on top of things. But *this*.

This is so much better.

The Cardinal

Laura Grace Dame

The female cardinal knows the worth of her name
leathery, toothpick toes clenched around a holly branch,
productive in the stillness of sitting.
Amidst the hounds-tooth breezes, tugging at her feathers
finger by finger,
she puffs up her warm-toned feathers
and manages to look snug.

Military eyes, wise beak, unwavering tail,
she is never-ending and never-endingly too short;
one minute she's there, resolute and pristine,
the next, a tree mourning its loss.
Her absence weeps the pain of the world,
The sound of her wings:
the sketch of an ending.

Monarch Butterflies

Tamala S. Barnett



Carolina

V. M. Kornfeld

This is the ragged culmination of it all.
Every blood-soaked ripped jean knee.
Every porch and alley, thick air, bitter exhalation.

There were years when you hated her.
The rolling mountains, the haze of far away brushfires.
She built you, and she broke you, and you refused to acknowledge
either one.

Now the memory makes you sick.
A roiling sick that both tethers you far away and painfully up close.
You'll never leave that city where you're from, it tells you.
Not even when you die. You'll be buried with her.

It will be a slightly too familiar hand between your shoulder blades
till then.
Despite its discomfort, you'll return to it.
It is the abuser that leaves you swimming in both fear and an
emptiness only their script can fill.

That isn't to say it was all bad.
There was much of substance, and of love.
Those who would hold you, and give you bad haircuts on moth-
filled back porches.

You want to summarize it.
But it's too complicated for that.
There's no simple answer to her melancholy.

And this is why the culmination must be ragged.
Ragged like the edges where you tore away the unwanted
with your teeth.
There will never be home the way there once was,
and it shows on you.

One might pity call it- wanderlust. But you know it's just an
inability to stand still.
You're still the child that jumped in every puddle.
She'll leave you with that.
She'll leave you your frog rain boots.
She'll leave you your love for sidewalk leaves.
She'll leave you with a comfort only growing up loved could bring.

All this and in the end, it must be ragged.
You never liked the straight and narrow after all.
So maybe ragged suits you.

Contributors

Tamala S. Barnett

Tamala is an executive assistant at A-B Tech and enjoys gardening, photography, and reading.

Whitman Bolles

Whitman has been teaching college English since 1994 and has been faculty here at A-B Tech since 2014.

Kyla Cottrell

Kyla is a part time student studying art and film production, and a writer of queer fiction. They recently made writing science-fiction and fantasy their full time job, and have been working on a novel for the last two years. In their free time they practice magic and costume making.

Jessie Crews

Jessie has a strict no-squash insect policy in her household.

Laura Grace Dame

Laura is an Asheville native currently in her second year at A-B Tech with plans to earn a bachelor's degree in English. She loves mystery stories, cats, Taylor Swift, and writing. Also, if you're reading this, she is absolutely delighted because it means she's in print for the first time.

Christian Donaldson

Christian is a full-time student pursuing a degree in engineering but enjoys the arts in her spare time. Recently, Christian has been using poetry as a therapeutic outlet to cope with the sudden, tragic death of her two year old daughter. Christian also has an 8-year-old son who motivates her to keep going.

Daniel A. Garcia

Daniel is a student who writes poetry.

Jacob Garrison

Jacob's focus as student, found artist, and member of society is sustainability –all four pillars– and waste reduction. Jacob identifies with the prisoner who escaped Plato's cave and the Lorax. Much of society (himself sometimes included) resides in many intertwining caves, some being health and habits of “product” selection/use/after-(first-)life. He envisions humankind listening to, observing, and respecting Nature's ever-wise teachings.

Ximena Guadalupe

Ximena attended Harvard and University of Missouri-Columbia and has a Ph.D. in poetry writing and some critical theories. She has been an English instructor at A-B Tech.

Joanna Guy

Joanna is collecting perspectives and unearthing connections as she looks at life, often times through the viewfinder of her Nikon. She finds mundanity perfectly photogenic. Observation is her favorite pastime, with or without the camera, but she rarely leaves home without it. Joanna is a part time student at A-B Tech and works part time to sustain her studies.

Elizabeth Helmich

Elizabeth is a full-time student who writes poetry and short fiction when she's not studying or wrangling children.

Minna Honkakoski

Minna is a full-time student pursuing an AFA in Studio Arts. Her interest is in painting and printmaking.

Jeff Horner

Jeff can't quite hold the superposition.

V. M. Kornfeld

V is a returning student at A-B Tech, he was born in Asheville eighteen years ago and is just returning home for the semester. He has loved story telling and literature since before he could read or even walk, and participates in poetry slams whenever the opportunity arises.

Ian A. Kushner

Ian is a part-time student and a full-time worker at your local Walmart. They enjoy writing, then pretending their writing is bad, and subsequently shelving their work forever.

Ben Latter

Ben is a student at A-B Tech. He likes to write fiction and read Western novels. He lives in West Asheville with his wife and dog.

Grier Low

Grier (he/they) is a person of transmasculine and working class experience. He is deeply committed to prison abolition, queer and trans visibility of all varieties, and the continued expansion of his book collection.

Morgen Lance

Morgen has hopes of being a future teacher. She enjoys writing poetry and short stories.

Nicole O. Lavoie

Nicole is a dedicated creator and Missiologist. Through her website, *Sailboat Prose*, she shares her love of missions through creative interpretation. Painting is her main medium, and any works for sale on her website go to funding future mission trips. To see what the hype is all about, check out the creation itself at <https://www.sailboatprose.com>

Bronwen G. McCormick

Bronwen is an instructor in the Culinary Arts and Hospitality department. She has spent the last several years exploring the art of watercolor.

Siobhan Turner Mountain

Siobhan is a recent graduate from A-B Tech and a current creative writing student at Southern New Hampshire University. A Content Manager and writer for a local Asheville company, she hails from Bangor, Maine and currently resides with her family in Mars Hill, North Carolina.

Joe Pellegrino

Joe is a 32-year-old professional photojournalist, amateur filmmaker and composer currently wrapping up an AS degree at A-B Tech with the intention to transfer to NCSU and study Horticultural Science.

Ellen J. Perry

Ellen has taught Literature and Humanities at the college level for twenty years. She enjoys traveling to France, reading, dancing, and playing with her stylish cat, Mlle. Coco Chanel. For more information please visit <http://ellenjperry.com>.

Kyah Phelan

Kyah is a full time student at A-B Tech pursuing an Associate in Arts in English. Writing is her greatest passion, and she hopes to continue nurturing this love both academically and professionally. The genre she focuses on most is poetry, although she has a great love of fiction as well.

Mark Damon Puckett

Mark's first play, *Do Not Miss the Main Attraction*, was produced by Edward Albee in Houston. He has taught English and Creative Writing in college, university and graduate school all over the country. Over the last few years he has been banging out a mean "Mood Indigo" on the piano.

Ellie Ritch

Ellie was a Madison Early College student at AB-Tech who graduated May, 2019. She is now a Mass Media Communications and Journalism major at UNC Asheville.

Ashlen Smith

Ashlen is a full-time student who enjoys the outdoors and landscape photography. You can find more of her work on Instagram @ashlensmith.

Nadia Stottlemeyer

Nadia is a part-time student going for a major in English education.

Linda K. Welsh

Linda is a non-traditional student, returning to academia in her mid-50s. Linda has a deep passion for the Fine Arts and is endeavoring to become a full time studio artist in Asheville, NC. Since returning to A-B Tech she has enjoyed quality studio classes and excellence of instruction. 'Education is a privilege'!

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